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How Church Bells Fell Silent: The Decline of Tower Bell Practices in Post-Revolutionary America

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

HOW CHURCH BELLS FELL SILENT: THE DECLINE OF
TOWER BELL PRACTICES IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

Deborah Lubken

Carolyn Marvin

Americans sounded church bells for multiple purposes: publishing local time, opening markets, alerting firefighters, celebrating and protesting political events, announcing deaths, conducting funeral processions, and, of course, assembling religious congregations. This dissertation approaches these uses as distinct communication practices that were implemented to achieve specific ends, interpreted through different frameworks, and modified to accommodate evolving needs and expectations. After addressing the uses of bells for political expression in the revolutionary and early national periods, I investigate the retreat of four such practices from the center of American life to its periphery: the death knell (sounded to announce the deaths of individuals), the funeral bell (sounded to gather and conduct funeral processions), the fire bell (sounded to alert and direct firefighters), and the churchgoing bell (sounded to assemble religious congregations for services). Shortly after the Revolution, Americans began to complain publicly about bells that rang or tolled too loudly or for excessive durations. These complaints, however, were practice-specific and arose according to different schedules. Americans moved to suppress funeral tolling in the late 1780s, petitioned municipal authorities to regulate the churchgoing bell by the 1820s, and began to anticipate fire alarms without bells by the late 1850s. Death knells, which conveyed information but did not summon inhabitants to congregate publicly, slipped quietly into memory. Audiences opposed (or defended) the funeral, fire, and churchgoing bells for different reasons and conceived annoyance, necessity, and harm in ways particular to each practice.

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HOW CHURCH BELLS FELL SILENT: THE DECLINE
OF TOWER BELL PRACTICES IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

Deborah Lubken

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Dedicated to all who have attended,

especially Jason.

ABSTRACT

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authorities to regulate the churchgoing bell by the 1820s, and began to anticipate fire alarms without bells by the late 1850s. Death knells, which conveyed information but did not summon inhabitants to congregate publicly, slipped quietly into memory. Audiences opposed (or defended) the funeral, fire, and churchgoing bells for different reasons and conceived annoyance, necessity, and harm in ways particular to each practice.

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(I render thanks most humbly)

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1. Inscribed on the treble bell of the parish church at Oakham, Rutland.

Quarterly. I am grateful to (then) editor Christopher Grasso, the journal's editorial staff, and reviewers.

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history and memory in new ways. My advisor, Carolyn Marvin, has transformed the way I think about media and communication. I am immensely grateful for her critical, constructive feedback.

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CHAPTER ONE

About Bells

There are many curious things about bells. The very name in old times meant to *bawl* or to *bellow*, and they have made much noise in the world. With their brazen tongues they tell of joy and sorrow, of war, of peace; they call to church, to marriage, to death, to work, to play, to school, to fire, to bed, and to rise.

— *The Independent*, June 1868²

The historiography of media technologies—particularly as it has taken shape within the field of communication and media studies—favors narratives about beginnings.³ At a practical level, moments when old technologies were new present communication historians, a group that asserts its relevance from the margins of a forward-looking field, with a reliable point of entry into central conversations about “new” media.⁴ The theoretical advantages of studying conception were convincingly

2. “About Bells,” *The Independent: Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, 11 June, 1868, 3.

3. An incomplete list of the many publications addressing the introduction of historical media includes James W. Carey, “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph,” in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 201-30; Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); the essays collected in Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds., *New Media, 1740-1915* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Jennifer S. Light, “Facsimile: A Forgotten ‘New Medium’ from the 20th Century,” *New Media & Society*, 8, no. 3 (2006): 355-78; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988); many of the essays collected in David W. Park, Nicholas W. Jankowski, and Steve Jones, eds., *The Long History of New Media: Technology, Historiography, and Contextualizing Newness* (New York, Peter Lang, 2011); Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century’s On-Line Pioneers* (New York: Walker and Company, 1998); Rudolph Stöber, “What Media Evolution Is: A Theoretical Approach to the History of New Media,” *European Journal of Communication*, 19, no. 4 (2004): 483-505.

4. Paddy Scannell has pointed out that “[a]cademic engagement with media has always been concerned with the shock of the new; successive generations have grappled with the impact of new media in their times.” Paddy Scannell, “The Dialectic of Time and Television,” *ANNALS of the American*

argued by Carolyn Marvin twenty-five years ago: emerging media disrupt established patterns of social distance and trust, engendering conditions for re-imagining matters of accessibility, attention, authority, and credibility: “who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed.”⁵

We have been less concerned with understanding moments when old media expired; accounts of invention and discovery far outnumber the periodic undertakings to check television’s pulse, deliberate the rumored passing of books, or examine the resuscitation of old forms and materials.⁶ Yet if media so reliably create a stir upon arrival, it is reasonable to ask if their departures—after years, decades, and sometimes centuries of entanglement with social life—likewise prove disruptive. How do these “constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication” slip from calendared time into memory and museums?⁷ How do they relinquish their social roles and their physical matter, their audiences, producers,

Academy of Political and Social Science, 625 (2008), 220. The imperative to fashion a link between one’s own research and “new” media exerts a perceptible influence on the work of early career scholars in particular. A facility for dusting off relics and conjuring their affinities with Twitter is less sleight-of-hand than survival skill. See also Benjamin Peters’ remarks on “new media” and professional networking. Benjamin Peters, “And Lead Us Not Into Thinking the New Is New: A Bibliographic Case for New Media History,” *New Media & Society*, 11 (2009), 15.

5. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 4. See also Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, “Introduction: What’s New About New Media?” in *New Media, 1740-1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xii.

6. Jean-Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book*, trans. Polly McLean (London: Harvill Secker, 2011); Elizabeth Eisenstein, “The End of the Book? Some Perspectives on Media Change,” *American Scholar*, 64, no. 4 (1995): 541-55; Elihu Katz and Paddy Scannell, ed., “The End of Television? Its Impact on the World (So Far),” special issue, *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625 (2009); Geoffrey Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For a diverse exploration of new and revived uses for old media, see the essays collected in Charles R. Acland, ed., *Residual Media*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

7. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 8.

and content? How do societies register the passing of communication technologies and practices, and what traces linger in the present for researchers to interpret?

This dissertation addresses these questions by investigating the retreat of four communication practices from the center of American life to its periphery: the death knell (sounded to announce that a death had transpired), the funeral bell (sounded to gather a procession at the time of burial), the fire bell (sounded to alarm listeners and direct firefighters), and the churchgoing bell (sounded to assemble congregations for religious services). To clarify, the “bells” of the previous sentence are habitual ways of communicating, not bronze artifacts. Although a majority of American tower bells sounded from church belfries, communities used church bells for a variety of purposes in addition to summoning religious congregations. Each of these purposes elicited particular responses from listeners and evoked particular associations. When the death knell, funeral bell, fire bell, and churchgoing bell fell into disfavor and disuse, they did so in distinct ways and for distinct reasons.

In Search of the Passing Bell

To investigate how the death knell, funeral bell, fire bell, and churchgoing bell passed, it is first necessary to understand how these practices worked in their heyday. Bells made their way across the Atlantic with the first Europeans and, as Richard Cullen Rath has pointed out, they “sounded the cadence of everyday life” in many American

communities for nearly two-and-a-half centuries.⁸ They roused inhabitants in the morning, cleared the streets at night, and signaled the commencement of market activity. They convened civic events and sounded fire alarms. They publicized deaths and accompanied funeral processions, and they articulated listeners to extended ecclesiastic and political communities. Historians of colonial America and the early republic have examined these routine uses of bells to structure daily life and shape identities, and they have also considered the role of bells on pivotal occasions as British subjects protested the empire's policies, declared independence, and worked to establish a new nation.⁹

What remain to be explored are the “piled-up structures of inference and implication”—to borrow an apt phrase from Clifford Geertz—through which Americans sounded bells and interpreted what they heard. Murmurs against bell practices arose in an environment where listeners recognized the summons of particular bells, differentiated methods of sounding (ringing, tolling, chiming), and immediately investigated if any bell sounded outside of familiar routines. The interpretive code was public and complex; bells could send straightforward signals, but they could also jest, dissimulate, and equivocate. Gilbert Ryle's intricate analysis of hypothetical eyelid movement, presented by Geertz in his appeal for “thick description,” is illuminating. Just as the rapid contraction of an

8. Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 35.

9. David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Stroud, U. K., 2004), 67-92; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore, 2003); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997), 16, 26, 34, 37; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 50-51; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass., 1997), 18-20, 26, 35-37, 40, 43, 53-54; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 30-31, 36-37.

eyelid might be variously interpreted as an involuntary twitch, a conspiratorial gesture (a wink), a gesture of ridicule (a parody of a wink), or even a rehearsal (to successfully produce a parody of a wink) the sounding of a bell was rich with possibilities. Winking, mock-winking, and rehearsed-mock-winking had their auditory analogues in Americans' complicated uses and interpretations of bell practices. Aggrieved British subjects used muffled ringing, an overtly benign expression of solemn mourning, to menace royal stamp distributors into resigning their posts. Quakers noticed when Episcopalian bells announced the deaths of Presbyterians. One bell tolling versus two bells chiming could signal the difference between a fire and a riot. The challenge is to describe these practices and contexts (cultural, geographic, auditory, and personal) thickly enough that past "winks" may be differentiated from their parodies.¹⁰

Searching for evidence of sounds and listening that transpired centuries ago may seem to be an exercise in futility, but Alain Corbin's history of the auditory landscape in rural nineteenth-century France demonstrates that such a study is feasible. *Village Bells* inspired this dissertation and, along with the larger body of Corbin's work on sensory history, it is a valuable reference for approaching the study of both media decline and tower bells as media. The bells that serve as the focal point of Corbin's analysis do not lead a "revolution in the culture of the senses" (his ultimate quarry); rather, the "disintegration" of their uses and meanings comprise the complex evidence by which this revolution is measured.¹¹ The bulk of Corbin's documentation comes from two broadly

10. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30 (quotation, 7); Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers: Collected Essays, 1929-1968*, vol. 2 (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 480-96.

11. Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*,

defined sources: municipal records and the writings of campanary¹² enthusiasts who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, embarked on a project to chronicle the state of existing bells and towers. Evidence of American bell practices may be found in municipal records, church archives, and antiquarian writings. But while Corbin is able to reference a “thick file preserved in the National Archives” and remark that municipal archives are “full to bursting with complaints,” documentation of past practices and controversies in American communities is less abundant and more widely scattered.¹³ The American context, as Corbin acknowledged in his foreword to the English translation of *Village Bells*, differed from that of rural France due to the former context’s expansive geography and “overlapping auditory cultures.”¹⁴ Consequently, understanding how Americans used and listened to bells requires casting a wider net.

Powerful resources have become available since Corbin published *Village Bells*. Digital databases and online archives have made large volumes of scattered primary sources quickly and easily accessible.¹⁵ This does not mean that historical research has become a matter of interpreting whatever keyword searches deliver; rather, digital resources are tools that historians may use discerningly for acquiring evidence to interpret alongside evidence from sources accessed in traditional ways. For an object of research

translated by Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Originally published as *Les Cloches de La Terre: Paysage Sonore et Culture Sensible Dans Les Campagnes Au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: A. Michel, 1994). The larger body of Corbin’s work is a testament to the feasibility of rigorous sensory history. See esp. Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire, and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, translated by Jean Birrell (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), esp. 181-95.

12. Campanology (derived from the Latin *campāna*) is the study of bells.

13. Corbin, *Village Bells*, 99, 201.

14. Corbin, *Village Bells*, xii.

15. These advances are, of course, relative. The undigitized past remains vast, and the accessibility of the digitized past depends on numerous political and technological factors, including developments in copyright law, the legibility of original documents, and the accuracy of text recognition.

as fleeting as the discontinuance of auditory practices whose audiences died centuries ago, being able to carefully scavenge, accumulate, and juxtapose evidence from many sources puts thick description within reach. By cross-referencing clues from the records of many towns and many churches; many articles and advertisements from newspapers, magazines, and trade publications; many letters and diaries; and whatever broadsides, etchings, and legal documents may be unearthed, it is possible to establish patterns—of uses, of sounding techniques, of installations, of contexts, of interpretations. Familiarity with these patterns is what makes their disruption noticeable, and disruption is key to understanding how old media expire. The goal is not to confirm that a practice or technology *departed*, but to find evidence of *departing*. In terms of the unsubtle metaphor that allows us to entertain arguments about media living and dying, the point is not to locate a headstone or other memorial (remembered practices create a different sort of stir than those that are making their exit), but to scour past scenes for signs of a struggle.

The traces left by a practice on its way out are easy to miss. What searching entails can be demonstrated by exploring the brief resuscitation, in late-seventeenth-century Boston, of a funerary custom *in extremis*. The quest begins in pre-Reformation Europe, where a practice known as the passing bell sounded not *after* a parishioner died, but *as* he or she was dying. This precise timing had to do with medieval expectations that the sound of consecrated church bells worked both communicatively and combatively: bells called upon the attention of mortal audiences, but they also waged war with evil spirits of the air. Baptized, named, and invested with apotropaic powers, church bells

were regarded as “half-divine” beings with personalities.¹⁶ Their inscriptions testified to a range of vocations that included not only sending information and summoning listeners, but also engaging phenomena thought to be caused by demonic activity, such as inclement weather and disease: FULMINA FRANGO (“I break the lightning”), FULGURA COMPELLO (“I drive away the thunder”), PESTEM FUGO, (“I put the plague to flight”).¹⁷ “The reason for consecrating and ringing bells,” explained the thirteenth-century canonist William Durandus, “is this”:

[T]hat by their sound the faithful may be mutually cheered on towards their reward; that the devotion of faith may be increased in them; that their fruits of the field, their minds and their bodies may be defended; that the hostile legions and all the snares of the Enemy may be repulsed; that the rattling hail, the whirlwinds, and the violence of tempests and lightning may be restrained; the deadly thunder and blasts of wind held off; the Spirits of the storm and the Powers of the air overthrown; and that such as hear them may flee for refuge to the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church, bending every knee before the standard of the Sacred Rood.¹⁸

The same malevolent spirits that incited thunderstorms and plague were thought to hover near death beds, waiting to harass departing souls. Sounding a church bell as death approached offered protection in two ways: (1) by warding away evil (EST MEA

16. Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (Oxford, 1983), 127. Using bells to dispel evil predates Christianity. The bells on priestly garments described in Exodus 28: 33-35, for example, likely served an apotropaic function. Ibid., 59-60.

17. Ibid., 122-29. Latin *virtutes* and their translations, from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries, are quoted from page 128.

18. William Durandus, *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments: A Translation of the First Book of the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (Leeds, 1291/1843), 87. For a comparative pre-Reformation explanation of bells’ power to dispel evil, see Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, transl. William Granger Ryan (Princeton University Press, 2012), 287-88.

CUNCTORUM VOX DAEMONIORUM, “My voice is the stayer of demons”) and (2) by prompting both the dying person and listeners within earshot to pray.¹⁹

Bell baptism and the employment of church bells to dispel evil were among a number of “superstitious” customs that reformers, and later scientists and rationalists, sought to appropriate and suppress.²⁰ From the Church of England’s initial separation with Rome through the ascension of James I, English reformers waged an ongoing effort to limit post-mortem uses of bells. These included the annual tradition of ringing for all departed Christians on the eve of All Souls, as well as death knells and peals sounded immediately before and after burials.²¹ Ringing for the dead, reformers thought, could be too easily construed as an invitation to intercede on behalf of souls in purgatory. The same Anglican canon that restricted death knells and funeral peals, however, mandated that “when any is passing out of this life, a bell shall be tolled.”²² The passing bell, in other words, persisted through virtue of its communicative capacity. On this matter, dissenting protestants generally agreed with the established Church of England: the passing bell was salutary, because it sounded while dying parishioners were still quick enough to contemplate their own mortality and benefit from the prayers of others.²³

19. Price, *Bells and Man*, 128.

20. Corbin, *Village Bells*, 101-10; David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 421-25; Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90-91, 97; Price, *Bells and Man*, 129-33; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 58-89.

21. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 14-15, 90-97, 117-18, 128-32, 161-68; Walter Howard Frere and William McClure Kennedy, eds., *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation: 1536-1558* (Longmans, Green, 1910), 2: 287, 3: 170.

22. Church of England, *The Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England: Referred to Their Original Sources, and Illustrated with Explanatory Notes*, ed. and Mackenzie Edward Charles Walcott (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1874), 94.

23. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 423; Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation*

Two contemporary accounts provide indications of how listeners responded to the passing bell in early seventeenth-century England, at about the time dissenters were migrating to the New World. The first is found in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, penned in December of 1623 while the author was recovering from a serious illness. Donne's famous entreaty to "never send to know for whom the bell tolls" occurs midway through a series of three devotions corresponding to the funeral bell, the passing bell, and the death knell, respectively.²⁴ The passing bell that Donne hears "tolling softly for another" assails no malevolent spirits; its work is primarily to instruct the living about their own mortality. Yet the meditation's opening lines suggest that the passing bell remained a compelling sound in early seventeenth-century London. "Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that." The passing bell's message, "Thou must die," was a foreboding imperative to broadcast, because its vague yet irrefutable conclusion left listeners to supply an addressee and a timeframe—to decide whether they belonged to the general audience, for whom the passing bell served as a reminder that all humankind must eventually die, or the specific audience, whose

England, 163-64. Peter Galison's concept of "trading zones" may apply here to the arrangement, by the Church of England and Protestant dissenters on one hand and Roman Catholic recusants on the other, to permit the passing bell, although each side valued the practice for different reasons. Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 803-10.

24. John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions: Together with Death's Duel* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1623/2007), 102-21 (quotation, 109). Leaving aside the literary significance of Donne's work, the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth devotions can be interpreted as an apologetics for the funeral bell, passing bell, and death knell. In each case, Donne presents arguments for the practice's communicative value, and he directly defends the funeral bell against detractors who would abolish the practice to discourage superstitious beliefs.

impending death the soft tolling adumbrated.²⁵ For listeners in failing health, especially those aware of impaired cognizance, a tolling bell might deliver news of their own impending death. Desiring to know for whom the bell tolled was a common impulse.

The perspective on the passing bell provided by Donne's devotions is that of an Anglican priest, reluctantly converted from Roman Catholicism, who weathered a life-threatening illness amidst an urban procession of passing bells, death knells, and funeral bells. In John Winthrop's account of the death of his second wife, Thomasine Clopton, we find clues about the passing bell's significance among Puritans in rural Suffolk. Clopton fell ill on a Monday in late November 1616. On Wednesday, Clopton acknowledged the possibility that she would not recover, and Winthrop called for a physician. Late on Thursday night, she "was taken wth deathe," and called for Winthrop, her friends, and a minister, certain that her end drew near. At this time, Clopton "desired that the bell might ringe for hir." When the bell began to ring, early on Friday, some of the friends and neighbors attending at Clopton's bedside "said it was the 4 aclock bell, but she conceivinge that they sought to coneale it from hir, that it did ringe for hir, she said it needed not, for it did not troble hir." To clarify, Clopton (who did not pass until the following Monday) initiated her own passing bell after anticipating that her death was approaching. Those attending to her willfully misinterpreted the signal, pretending that the bell rang for a routine purpose unrelated to Clopton's illness (the early bell that roused the parish on a daily basis). In terms of Geertz, by way of Ryle, the audience waiting with Clopton "winked." But Clopton called their bluff, using the moment to

25. *Ibid.*, 107.

assure them that she knew better: the passing bell announced that her death approached, and she was ready.²⁶

The accounts by Donne and Winthrop suggest that the passing bell persisted in both urban and rural England, among both Anglicans and Dissenters, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. If church bells had, by this time, lost their clout as demon-stayers, sounding a bell as death approached still held meaning for mortal audiences. Thomasine Clopton's negotiation with her family and friends over the passing bell's meaning is an especially strong indication of the practice's contemporary relevance: a practice that can be used successfully to "wink" with or about has yet to answer its final summons. Yet, fifteen years after a fading Clopton ordered her own passing bell, there is scant evidence of the practice in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, governed by John Winthrop—it is almost as though the passing bell slipped overboard en route to the New World. The few existing accounts of mortuary and funerary ritual in the colony during its early decades, such as a 1641 report by Thomas Lechford, mention only post-mortem tolling in the context of assembling burial processions: "[N]othing is read, nor any funeral Sermon made, but all the neighbourhood, or a good company of them, come together by tolling of the bell, and carry the dead solemnly to his grave, and there stand by him while he is buried."²⁷ How did a common end-of-life practice vanish so quickly and with hardly a trace?

26. John Winthrop, *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, edited by Robert C. Winthrop, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1869), 82. As the Lady of Groton Manor, Suffolk, Clopton was presumably in a better position than most to initiate her own passing bell.

27. Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing or News from New England*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Boston: J. K. Wiggin & William Parsons Lunt, 1641/1867), 87-88.

Although there is insufficient evidence to answer the above question conclusively, possible explanations can be extrapolated from clues. First, the passing bell may have gone quiet due to an initial scarcity of church bells in North America. Tower bells are heavy, relatively fragile artifacts. Manufacturing them requires craftsmanship and experience, and, until the mid-eighteenth century, they were exclusively imported from Europe. Although colonial Americans desired bells and went to great lengths to acquire them, many smaller communities made do without a bell for generations. Secondly, the passing bell may have been waylaid on its transatlantic journey by theology and politics. Before and during the Interregnum (1649-1660), dissenters in England made noticeable headway in stripping funeral ritual of superstitious and extravagant trappings and in shifting the oversight of burials from religious to civic authorities.²⁸ The *Directory for the Publique Worship of God*, approved by Parliament in 1645 to supplant the *Book of Common Prayer*, mentioned no uses of bells as death approached or before, during, or after burials.²⁹ The passing bell, death knell, and funeral bell were restored along with the monarchy in the 1660s, in what David Cressy described as an effort to “rehabilitate” the ceremonies of the Church of England. By that time, Cressy concluded, “[s]trict dissenters had already ceased to listen.”³⁰ Here, Cressy’s wording is ambiguous, for although

28. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 97-108.

29. *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God. Together with an Ordinance of Parliament for the Taking Away of the Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1644), 64-74 for sections on visiting the sick and burying the dead. To be precise, the uses of bells were regulated by the Anglican *Constitutions and Canons* rather than the *Book of Common Prayer*.

30. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 425.

dissenters may have ceased to put stock in the passing bell, some of them attended to its sound with a vigilance peculiar to aggrieved audiences.

It is in the diary of a strict dissenter, the Puritan judge Samuel Sewall, that traces of the passing bell's final moments in Boston may be found. Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were generally inhospitable toward established Church rituals, but during their short-lived incorporation into the Dominion of New England (1686-1689) inhabitants encountered regular reminders that they were England's subjects and lived within the purview of its church. Sewall began noting Anglican incursions into the dissenting soundscape shortly after the arrival of Governor Edmund Andros, who conveyed his intent to appropriate dual use of a meeting house on the day he assumed office. All three of the town's congregations refused to accommodate his request, and Andros initially convened Anglican meetings in Boston's town house, making use of the bell at the adjacent First Church. Later, he insisted on full access to the remaining two meeting houses, including their bells. Andros' first infringement was for the public observance of a festival on the liturgical calendar. "This day is kept for St. Paul, and the Bell was rung in the Morning to call persons to Service," Sewall recorded. "The Governour (I am told) was there."³¹ Less than a week later, a bell rang to convene a meeting "respecting the beheading of Charles the First"—Boston's first public

31. Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, vol. 5, Fifth Series. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 166.

commemoration of the late monarch's execution.³² Almost every mention of a bell in Sewall's diary over the next three years is related to Andros and the Church of England.

Sewall registered the passing bell's resuscitation with a terse entry in May 1687: "Hamilton, Capt. of the Kingsfisher dies. 'Tis said that the North Bell was toll'd as he was dying."³³ This description is brief, but it is clearly of a passing bell, not a death knell or funeral bell. The bell had tolled while the captain of the Kingfisher (the ship on which Andros had arrived the previous December) was dying; it had not tolled to announce his death or to assemble mourners for his funeral and burial. Sewall's entry should also be interpreted in its geographic context. By this time, Andros was requisitioning use of the North Church's bell (over a half mile away from Sewall's home) in addition to the bell of the South Meeting House (one block away from Sewall's home). The bell that tolled for Captain Hamilton, as he was dying, was the bell of the North Church. This explains why Sewall, who regularly distinguished between first- and second-hand information in his diary, began the entry in question with "'Tis said." Sewall himself did not hear the bell toll; rather, he learned from others that the bell had tolled and under what circumstances. The passing bell that tolled for Captain Hamilton was familiar enough for Bostonians to recognize, but unusual enough to be controversial and newsworthy.

Samuel Sewall's account of Captain Hamilton's passing bell is the type of trace that declining communication practices leave as they pass from lived experience into memory. Hidden in plain sight among hundreds of concisely described deaths and burials,

32. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 166. See also Mary Lou Lustig, *The Imperial Executive in America: Sir Edmund Andros, 1637-1714* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 160.

33. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 178.

Sewall's remark that "the North Bell was toll'd as he was dying" is his only mention of a passing bell in fifty-five years of keeping a diary. The phrase is impervious to simple keyword searches; in fact, querying digital resources for the "passing bell" will pull up misleading references to later practices that went by the same name. (Notably, by the second decade of the eighteenth century Boston's burial regulations permitted an optional "Third or Passing Bell," following two preceding periods of tolling, on the day of a burial.)³⁴ Deciphering Sewall's cryptic comment requires familiarity (to return to Geertz) with the imaginative and geographic universes of Sewall in particular and late-seventeenth-century Boston Puritans in general: with the significance of a bell tolled *in extremis* versus a bell tolled for a burial; with the typical contexts in which Sewall did (or did not) mention bell practices in his diary, and with changes in those patterns during the governorship of Edmund Andros; with the offense taken by Boston Puritans at Andros's efforts to impose the Church of England's presence in their community; with the fact that Andros arrived in Boston on the HMS Kingfisher, with Hamilton at the helm; with the fraught relationship between religious Dissenters and the English monarchy; with reformers' centuries-long campaign to eradicate superstition from religious practice; and with previous (perhaps lingering) belief in the power of consecrated bells to dispel evil.

34. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), 13: 22. Boston regulations first permitted a third period of tolling in April of 1711 and first referred to the practice as the "Passing Bell" in July of 1717. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1884), 11: 129. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some communities established a practice of sounding a "passing bell" the morning after a death. See George Kuhn Clarke, *History of Needham Massachusetts, 1711-1911* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1912), 322; Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1: 199.

To the extent that the imaginative universe in which Americans listened to tower bells may be reconceived, it is largely “from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters.”³⁵ Identifying patterns of uses and interpretations—establishing that bells tolled for burials or rang on political anniversaries—is, of course, important. But an inventory of occasions when bells sounded cannot begin to make sense of the tangle of political and theological animosity, spanning centuries and continents, bound up in Samuel Sewall’s remark that the North bell tolled for the captain of the *Kingfisher as he was dying*. The challenge of this dissertation is not only to recognize the traces left by tower bell practices as they were passing, but also to make these details speak to higher-order issues and concepts: soundscape, modernity, and noise.

If a Tree Falls in a Soundscape...

Although *soundscape* has frequented both scholarly and popular writing for decades, the term retains a faint air of neologism—enough that it seldom ventures into academic discourse unaccompanied by an attempt to recite its provenance. Most authors attribute both the term and the idea to R. Murray Schafer, an environmentally-minded composer who aspired to “tune the world.”³⁶ For Schafer, what distinguished industrial societies from their agrarian precursors was the unchecked proliferation of noise. As a remedy to the problem of modern noise pollution, he proposed identifying sounds worthy

35. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 21.

36. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977).

of preservation, eliminating “boring and destructive” sounds, and systematically educating listeners to detect the difference through a program of “ear cleaning.” Through these efforts, Schafer proposed, the soundscape of the world might be reorchestrated.³⁷ Schafer’s framing of the soundscape as “any acoustic field of study” has been dutifully quoted hundreds of times since its initial publication in 1977.³⁸ Because soundscape persists as one of the most contentious concepts in the burgeoning field of sound studies, Schafer’s definition merits examination in context.

The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape. We can isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape.³⁹

Taking into account that this definition is found in the introductory pages of a book subtitled *The Tuning of the World*, the range of phenomena to which Schafer’s soundscape may apply is quite large. There is ample room for interpretation and disagreement.

A common objection to soundscape, as a term and as a concept, is that its broad scope accommodates imprecise and irregular adoption across an assorted collection of scholarship. “In its near-ubiquity,” Ari Kelman recently complained, “the term has come to refer to almost any experience of sound in almost any context.”⁴⁰ This point is difficult to dispute. The soundscapes addressed in scholarly literature vary widely: they may be

37. Ibid., 3-12 (quotations, 3, 4, 7).

38. Ibid., 7.

39. Ibid., 7.

40. Ari Kelman, “Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies,” *Senses and Society* 5, no. 2 (2010), 214.

transatlantic or as intimate as the interior of an automobile; they may be dreamt or imagined as well as heard; they may occupy minutes or characterize entire historical periods.⁴¹ And, as Kelman convincingly demonstrated, scholars from a variety of fields have appropriated *soundscape* for the titles of their publications, while either altering or “totally reworking Schafer’s term from the inside out to suit their own needs.”⁴² But Kelman’s call to “honor” Schafer’s “original” definition may be overhasty.⁴³ *Soundscape* may not have been Schafer’s to begin with. A cursory search in historical newspaper databases shows that in the decade before Schafer first used the term in a publication, cultural critics employed *soundscape* to describe performances of musical works, dance recitals, and radio plays.⁴⁴ A broader sense of the term, closer to the scope of the

41. See Sophie Arkette, “Sounds Like City,” *Theory Culture & Society* 21(1) (2004): 159-68; Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Michael Bull, “Soundscapes of the Car: A Critical Study of Automobile Habitation” In *The Auditory Culture Reader*, edited by Michael Bull and Les Back, 357-374 (Oxford: Berg, 2003); David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns,” *Urban History* 30(1) (2003): 5-25; Mack Hagood, “Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness, and the Mobile Production of Personal Space,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 573-89; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ronda L. Sewald, “Forced Listening: The Contested Use of Loudspeakers for Commercial and Political Messages in the Public Soundscape,” *American Quarterly* 63(3) (September 2011): 761-80; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Derek Valliant, “Peddling Noise: Contesting the Civic Soundscape of Chicago, 1890-1913,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 96, no. 3 (2003): 257-87; Nick Yablon, “Echoes of the City: Spacing Sound, Sounding Space, 1888-1916,” *American Literary History* 19(3) (2007): 629-60.

42. Kelman, “Rethinking the Soundscape,” 215.

43. *Ibid.*, 214.

44. My search for earlier uses of *soundscape* is clearly not exhaustive. A more thorough search for its beginnings could prove illuminating and time-consuming. See Clive Barnes, “The Dance: Is 2d City Slipping to 3d?” *New York Times*, February 21, 1966, 49; Louise O. Cleveland, “Trials In the Soundscape: The Radio Plays of Samuel Beckett,” *Modern Drama*, 11, no. 3 (1969): 267-82; Paul Hume, “Boston Symphony Presents Concert of True Sophistication,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 1964, C9; Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 171; Howard Klein, “Rubenstein Shows Usual Brilliance,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1966, 26; Howard Klein, “Music: ‘Exotic’ Night at Philharmonic,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1966, 17; Thomas Willis, “Berio’s Sinfonia Stirring, Enjoyable, Significant Work,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1969, F4.

soundscape that Schafer later threatened to tune, was used by Buckminster Fuller in a 1964 address to music educators: “When, in due course, man invented words and music he altered the soundscape and the soundscape altered man.”⁴⁵ When *soundscape* first entered Schafer’s publications, at the beginning of a 1969 handbook entitled *The New Soundscape*, the word appeared, without preamble, as vocabulary recognizable to the intended readership: “One of the purposes of this booklet is to direct the ear of the listener towards the new soundscape of contemporary life, to acquaint him with a vocabulary of sounds he may expect to hear both inside and outside concert halls.”⁴⁶ It was eight years later, in *The Tuning of the World*, that Schafer concertedly defined the concept.⁴⁷

If *soundscape* did not necessarily belong to Schafer first, the obligation to safeguard his definition is perhaps not so pressing, and the term need not be inextricably harnessed to his regulatory project. But there are other reasons to think twice about *soundscape*. The most compelling of these have been presented by anthropologist Tim Ingold in an essay originally titled “Against Soundscape.”⁴⁸ Ingold’s argument,

45. Buckminster Fuller, “The Music of the New Life,” *Music Educators Journal*, 52, no. 6 (1966): 52. The first part of Fuller’s address is found in the journal’s previous issue: volume 52, no. 5.

46. R. Murray Schafer, *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* (Scarborough, Ontario: Berandol Music Limited, 1969), 3.

47. Oddly, the definition of *soundscape* cited by Kelman as Schafer’s “original”—the definition that Kelman argues should be safeguarded—is not to be found on page 7 or anywhere else in Schafer’s *Tuning of the World*. “Any aural area of study” (which Kelman misattributes to Schafer) differs markedly from the definition Schafer did publish: “any acoustic field of study.” Since the publication of Kelman’s article, however, “any aural area of study” has at least twice been cited to page 7 of Schafer’s *Tuning of the World*. Kelman, “Rethinking the Soundscape, 215; Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 7.

48. Tim Ingold, “Against Soundscape,” in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Acoustic Practice*, edited by Angus Carlyle, 10–13 (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007). This essay began as a commentary given at the end of a 2006 conference. Ingold published a revised version as Chapter 11 of his 2011 collection, *Being Alive*, under the title “Four Objections to the Concept of Soundscape,” and it is this version that I cite here. Ingold’s argument is complex, densely written, and provocative in ways that a survey of literature cannot easily capture. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and*

dramatically condensed, is that the term encourages misleading ways of thinking about human perception generally and hearing and sound specifically. First, Ingold argued, *sound*- segregates hearing from the remainder of sensory perception, which is not how hearing is experienced: “the environment that we experience, know and move around in is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which we enter it.”⁴⁹ *Sound*- also casts the ears as “instruments of playback,” rather than organs of perception, Ingold contended, by implying that “the power of hearing inheres in” acoustic objects rather than in the body of the listener.⁵⁰ This is unacceptable, Ingold argued, because sound “is not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear *in*.”⁵¹ *-Scape* (derived not from the Greek *skopos*, “to look,” but from the Old English *sceppan*, “to shape”) compounds this problem by directing attention to the world’s surfaces, when sound is an “infusion of the medium in which we find our being and through which we move.”⁵²

Ingold’s case against *soundscape* is illuminating and compelling. Most importantly, it raises questions about how (and whether) the word so conveniently evokes the intersection of audition and place. But Ingold stops short at offering a replacement for *soundscape*, recommending only that metaphors for writing about auditory space be

Description (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 136-39.

49. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 136.

50. *Ibid.*, 137.

51. *Ibid.*, 138, emphasis in original. Another of Ingold’s comments clarifies this point: “[N]either sound nor light, strictly speaking, can be an object of our perception. Sound is not *what* we hear, any more than light is what we see” (138).

52. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 138 (quotation). For the etymology of landscape, see Chapter 10 of Ingold’s *Being Alive* (126) and Kenneth R. Olwig, “Performing on the Landscape Versus Doing Landscape: Perambulatory Practice, Sight and the Sense of Belonging,” in *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, edited by Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst, 81–91 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

derived from meteorology.⁵³ Until this promising, weather-based vocabulary is presented for consideration, the most practical option for a communication dissertation concerned with the decline of auditory practices, primarily assessed through listeners' interpretations, is to adopt an ecumenical position toward *soundscape* and use the word judiciously and in clearly defined contexts. Hearing is not experienced in isolation of other senses, but it is at times desirable to separate the world's auditory dimension for analysis, and *soundscape* remains useful for this purpose. Like Emily Thompson, then, I understand a soundscape to be an auditory environment shaped from both matter and meaning; it is "simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment [...] both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world."⁵⁴ As auditory practices, the death knell, funeral bell, fire bell, and churchgoing bell helped to comprise soundscapes, and they fell into disuse and disfavor in relation to particular physical environments and cultural expectations.

Prolonged Exposure to Modernity

Sensory historians have devoted special effort to charting the soundscape of modernity, motivated, in part, by a desire to reclaim attention for hearing in discourses preoccupied with vision.⁵⁵ Narratives of "hearing loss," Leigh Eric Schmidt famously

53. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 138. Ingold extends this recommendation to adopt meteorological metaphors for describing sensory perception more generally in Chapter 10 of the same book, 126-35.

54. Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1-2 (quotations). Thompson redefines soundscape in terms of Alain Corbin's "auditory landscape." Corbin, *Village Bells*, ix, xii, xx. Like Thompson, Mark M. Smith has emphasized the dual cultural-material nature of soundscapes, arguing that "[b]ecause a soundscape may be both an actual environment and an abstract construction, it is important to treat it as both." Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, 265.

55. The literature on sensory history and the historical study of sound is extensive. In addition to

argued, have presumed that Western societies experienced a sensory reorganization en route to the Enlightenment: that as literacy and print technologies diffused, populations evolved “from engaged speakers and listeners into silent scanners of words, isolated readers in the linear world of text.”⁵⁶ These streamlined accounts of ocular hegemony, Schmidt contended (pointedly referencing Walter Ong’s shifting “sensorium” and Marshall McLuhan’s insistence that civilization furnished “tribal man” with an “eye for an ear”), have deprived hearing and the proximate senses (touch, taste, and smell) of their own post-Enlightenment histories.⁵⁷ Jonathan Sterne criticized these same narratives for the “set of presumed and somewhat clichéd attributes” underlying their explanation of vision’s ascent and hearing’s corresponding suppression. This “audiovisual litany,” he argued, juxtaposes the two senses according to ahistorical, binary assumptions: that “hearing is spherical, vision is directional,” for example, or that “hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense.”⁵⁸ Sterne’s own account of nineteenth-

works by Leigh Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Sterne (addressed here in some detail), my thinking has been shaped by Corbin, *Time, Desire, and Horror*; Corbin, *Village Bells*; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Richard Cullen Rath, “Hearing American History,” *Journal of American History* 95 (2) (2008): 417–31; Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2011); Bruce R. Smith, *Acoustic World of Early Modern England*; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*; Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Mark M. Smith, “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 841–58; Mark M. Smith, “The Garden in the Machine: Listening to Early American Industrialization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, 39–57 (Oxford University Press, 2012).

56. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7–9, 15–28 (quotation: 16).

57. Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 16–22. See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), 26; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New Accents. London: Routledge, 1982).

58. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15–16. See also Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in Jonathan Sterne, editor, *The Sound Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), 9–10. Like Schmidt, Sterne traces the audiovisual litany to familiar suspects, including Eric Havelock, Edmund Carpenter, Marshall McLuhan,

century sound reproduction establishes the historicity of listening, hearing, and acoustic environments to describe an “Ensoniment” alongside the Enlightenment.⁵⁹ Likewise, Schmidt’s attention to “half-planned poachings, mediations, and transmutations” produces a counter-narrative of nineteenth-century Christian listening that challenges well-worn assumptions about the reduction of hearing. The way to overwrite tales of modern “hearing loss” is to write the complex, contradictory histories of the soundscapes they have obscured.

Mapping the modern soundscape is a formidable undertaking because modernity, as a concept and as a context, is extraordinarily difficult to pin down. By aggregating well-known scholarly accounts, modernity may be (very) roughly defined as a distinctive mode of life brought about by a confluence of transformations (social, political, intellectual, economic, technological, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral) in Western cultures between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries (give or take a century in either direction). The sources and consequences of transformation were many (although not infinite), and the various accounts in circulation necessarily emphasize select characteristics while excluding others. An incomplete inventory of modernity’s defining (and interrelated) features includes the rise of nation states, the emergence of public spheres and mass communication systems, advances in transportation, scientific discovery and technological innovation, industrialization, the growth of capitalism, commoditization, large-scale immigration, urbanization, the emergence of mass political and social

and Walter Ong (whose table of contents for *Orality and Literacy* serves as a concise illustration of the litany). Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New Accents. London: Routledge, 1982), v-vii.

59. Sterne, *Audible Past*, 2.

movements, bureaucratization, disenchantment, the standardization of time, the separation (and recombination) of time and space, the emergence of expert systems, the privatization of family life, intolerance for discomfort, increased sensitivity to the suffering of self and others, overstimulation of the psyche and senses, secularization, and the prevalence of rationalism, individualism, and consumerism.⁶⁰

Modernity is so overwhelmingly multifaceted and complex that even consulting a map to navigate particular stretches of its soundscape is perilous; whatever path you follow, the choice is apt to draw criticism from fellow travelers who, having ventured through comparable terrain with a similar map, have their own ideas about which route you should have taken. Michele Hilmes' combined review of Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* and Emily Thompson's *The Soundscape of Modernity* illustrates the dilemma vividly. In Hilmes' assessment, Sterne's analysis "jump[s] all over the map" because the understanding of modernity guiding his work "forms so broad and sweeping a landscape."⁶¹ If Sterne's modernity is too large, Thompson's is too small and, Hilmes suggests, injudiciously formulated.

[A]re the central characteristics of this modernity—defined by Thompson as efficiency, commodification, and technical mastery over time and space—really

60. The literature on modernity is formidably extensive. The defining features mentioned here are those examined by Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 11–32; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); David Michael Levin, editor, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, edited by Richard Sennett, 47–60 (New York, Appleton Century Crofts, 1969); Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *The Hastings Center Report*, 25, no. 2 (1995): 24–33.

61. Michele Hilmes, "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?" *American Quarterly*, 57, no. 1 (2005): 249–59 (quotation, 254).

the most relevant ones to the history she describes? One could just as readily propose cultural hierarchies, national identity, and the rise of urban culture, all of which play important, but under-acknowledged, structuring functions in Thompson's work.⁶²

Divining a "most relevant" path through modernity's soundscape—a path that keeps the horizon in view, visits destinations specific to the topic at hand, and accommodates the interests of both a wide readership and dedicated radio specialists—is a tall order. Searching for such a path presents its own type of pitfall: the infinitely analyzable relationships between maps and the territory. It is possible to get so caught up belaboring correspondences between specific evidence and modernity's myriad abstractions that inquiry devolves into a circular exercise of scouring past moments for traces of modernity, only to confirm, in the end, that those past moments were indeed modern.

To navigate modernity's vast and complex soundscape, I have consulted maps (and maps of maps) by an assortment of cartographers, to whom I am grateful.⁶³ I have not, however, plotted a definitive course through the modern soundscape's most relevant domains.⁶⁴ The protagonists of this dissertation are bell practices; modernity happens to be the context in which they were last heard from. And the relationship between modernity arriving and bells falling silent is complicated.

62. 56. Ibid., 25.

63. Of the works cited above, Sterne and Thompson's respective accounts of the modern soundscape have been particularly helpful, as have the more general works on modernity by Berman, Giddens, and Lears. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*; Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*; Lears, *No Place of Grace*; Sterne, *Audible Past*; Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*.

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How modernity influenced Americans' perceptions of church bells has been addressed by previous scholarship. R. Murray Schafer observed that once industrialists acquired the right to make sound without censure (a privilege he termed "Sacred Noise"), the "acoustic outreach" of urban church bells receded into a lo-fi soundscape. In some communities, audiences came to classify bell ringing—which once constituted Sacred Noise—with industrial noise pollution.⁶⁵ Religious studies scholar Isaac Weiner recently elaborated Schafer's explanation, arguing that Protestant Americans' privilege of making Sacred Noise came under attack in cities experiencing rapid immigration and industrialization, just as a secularizing trend in US law was limiting the power of churches to impose quiet on Sundays.⁶⁶ Most impressively, Hillel Schwartz distilled the plight of church bells in Western cities (bells were "not so much out of place as out of time") while conveying, in remarkable breadth, the reasons modern listeners offered when finding the sound of church bells superfluous, harmful, intrusive, dissonant, and irritating.⁶⁷ But there is an earlier chapter to this story: before bells fell out of sync with modern life, they helped to accelerate the pace of change. They were, as Alain Corbin remarked in the foreword to the English translation of *Village Bells*, "a prerequisite in a society increasingly subject to haste but as yet without any other means of transmitting information instantaneously."⁶⁸ Bells that were harnessed to public clocks disseminated

65. Schafer, *Soundscape*, 76, 177.

66. Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 19-39.

67. Schwartz, *Making Noise*, 301-14 (quotation, 313). For an earlier conference paper that addressed the same questions, see Hillel Schwartz, "Noise and Silence: The Soundscape and Spirituality," paper presented at a meeting of the Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace, Seoul, South Korea, August 20-27, 1995. Accessed February 28, 2006: <http://www.nonoise.org/library/noisesil/noisesil.htm>

68. Corbin, *Village Bells*, x.

standardized time, making possible what Alexis McCrossen has described as a “cultural construction of simultaneity” necessary for both nationalism and modern time discipline.⁶⁹ More generally, bells that sounded for a variety of other purposes transformed individual listeners into audiences whose attention modern institutions required: factory workers, firefighting and police forces, bodies of elected political representatives, and various manifestations of “the people.” Bells, in other words, helped to usher in modernity before succumbing to modernity’s conditions.

Certain modern processes did contribute quite noticeably to bells falling into disuse and disfavor, but a concise round-up of the most conspicuous suspects leaves important questions unanswered. Consider the cluster of related pressures occasioned by urbanization. The growth of American cities brought together large and increasingly diverse populations to live, work, and die in close proximity. This led to more bells, sounding more frequently, within range of more ears, which increasingly were attuned to varying needs and interests. Bells had always broadcast to all listeners within earshot while informing, summoning, or motivating particular audiences. But as populations grew and diversified, the ratio of addressed to incidental listeners began to shift: when a bell announced a death, assembled a funeral procession, directed firefighters, or summoned a congregation, it sounded for a proportionately smaller contingent of interested listeners while demanding everyone’s attention. Persons comprising these incidental audiences began to complain that bells sounded too frequently and for

69. Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 89-113 (quotation: 92).

purposes incompatible with life in a city, crowded with culturally diverse strangers who subscribed to different faiths, followed different schedules, and enjoyed (or suffered) varying states of physical and mental health. In many instances, frustrated city dwellers explicitly contrasted their own plight with that of rural listeners, imagining “the country” as a quainter, quieter place in which the sound of a church bell remained informative, meaningful, and even musical. Yet urbanization has limits as an explanation. Although practices lingered longer in less populated areas on average, reforms in smaller communities sometimes preceded those in urban centers. Selectmen in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, moved “to prevent the usual very long tolling of the bells for funerals” in July 1789, two months before New York’s common council passed that city’s first ordinance to limit the duration of funeral bells.⁷⁰ More importantly, inhabitants of smaller towns sought to restrain bell practices for many of the same reasons as their crowded, big-city counterparts. In March 1875, when an alderman from New York’s twenty-first ward proposed restrictions on the use of bells for assembling religious congregations, newspaper editors in far-flung parts reprinted excerpts from the ensuing debate and offered their own commentary.⁷¹ While some, like the editor of the *New Orleans Times*, perceived an attack on sacred tradition and worried for the future of all

70. “The Selectmen agreeably to a vote of the town...” *Portsmouth New-Hampshire Gazette*, 23 July 1789, [3]. New York’s first ordinance to limit the duration of funeral bells (addressed at length in Chapter Three) was passed on August 19, 1789. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831* (New York: City of New York, 1917), 1: 478.

71. Oliver P. C. Billings called the churchgoing bell a “nuisance” and proposed restrictions on its time and duration. See “Municipal Movements. Aggressive Measures of the Aldermen,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1875, 8. Billings, who did not mention the bell of a particular church, resided at 143 East 34th Street, around the corner from the Episcopal congregation of St. John the Baptist, whose bell was the subject of an 1882 lawsuit. See Schwartz, *Making Noise*, 307-08.

things sentimental and poetic, others sympathized with the reformers.⁷² Editors of the (Macon) *Georgia Weekly Telegraph* reprinted an anti-bell editorial from the *New York World*, adding that “a good many” of Macon’s inhabitants (who then numbered roughly twelve thousand) also considered the churchgoing bell a nuisance.⁷³ Three months later, when a contingent of Macon inhabitants protested “the loud and long-repeated ringing of the church bells” on Sundays, the *Telegraph* hosted its own paper war, with combatants rehashing many of the issues deliberated during the New York controversy. Frustrated Maconites, like their crowded counterparts in Manhattan three months earlier, complained that the churchgoing bell carried on for excessive durations, that it harmed sick listeners and annoyed healthy ones, that it was useless for assembling scattered congregations, and that it was rendered unnecessary by new technologies and practices.⁷⁴

Although the outcry against the funeral, fire, and churchgoing bells implicated an extensive array of modernity’s characteristic transformations, shifts, and discontinuities, it is important to recognize that these practices did not expire from prolonged exposure to

72. “And now comes New York, through her aldermen, with an ordinance to prohibit the ringing of church bells on Sundays...” *New Orleans Times*, 26 March 1875, 4.

73. “New Yorkers are making a movement to abolish the ringing of church bells...” *Macon Telegraph and Messenger*, 26 March 1875, [2].

74. “A Protest,” *Macon Telegraph and Messenger*, 29 June 1875, [2]; Jack Sparrow, “Church Bells,” *Macon Telegraph and Messenger*, 30 June 1875, [2]; Jack Sparrow, “Church Bells,” *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6]; “The Church-going Bells,” *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6]. Isaac Weiner referenced an article from this same Macon episode alongside newspaper coverage of 1879 controversies in New York and St. Louis, in the context of discussing opposition to church bells as a primarily urban phenomenon. With a population of 12,749 in 1880, Macon did meet the technical definition of *urban* then used by the US Census Bureau. The comparability of Macon’s soundscape with that of New York or St. Louis, however, is limited, given the enormous differences in population size, density, and diversity. Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, 36. For 1880 demographic statistics on the communities in question, see United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Supplement for Georgia* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 569; Campbell Gibson, “Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990,” Tables 5 and 6, Population Division Working Paper No. 27, US Bureau of the Census (June 1998). <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html#notes>.

abstractions. The case of the churchgoing bell is most striking. Reformers in diverse communities appealed to modern sources of authority (e.g., medical, scientific, legal, and musical experts) to argue that the practice harmed modern audiences (e.g., businessmen, night workers, and neurasthenics), interfered with modern activities (e.g., reading the newspaper), invaded modern spaces (e.g., private homes), and offended modern expectations (e.g., a right to peace and quiet). Yet public controversy did not seethe continuously; it surfaced sporadically and in relation to specific audiences and contexts: new residents moved (or were born) into a neighborhood near a church, for example, or a church acquired a new bell, repaired an old bell, or commenced sounding an established bell at a different time of day or in a different manner.⁷⁵ Participants in these skirmishes interpreted the churchgoing bell in reference to both modern change and local soundscapes—sometimes simultaneously. When defenders of the practice in New York protested that “[n]obody thinks of putting down those terrible uproars of Wall Street Exchange,” for example, they implicitly reproved the city’s aldermen for privileging commercial over religious interests, but they also evoked an audible bedlam that swelled daily in lower Manhattan.⁷⁶ Modernity’s sweeping -isms and -izations supplied a hospitable environment in which annoyance could incubate, but private frustrations

75. This continues to be the case with present-day disputes over church bells, chimes, and carillons. Behind every witty headline—residents feeling “all rung out” or churches persisting with “bellicose” ringing—are new listeners, a new ringing schedule, or a new (or newly repaired) bell. Exceptions to this rule may exist, but I have yet to encounter one. For the crafty headlines quoted here, see Joe Garofoli, Gerald D. Adams, “Ring of the Bellicose,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 November 2003. <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Ringing-of-the-bellicose-Neighbor-taking-North-2511405.php> (Accessed 20 August 2007); “Heavenly Bells Leave Her Feeling All Rung Out,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 2007. <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Ringing-of-the-bellicose-Neighbor-taking-North-2511405.php>. (Accessed 20 August 2007).

76. “Bell-Ringing,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1875, 10 (quotation).

erupted into public controversies when the equilibrium shifted between particular bells and audiences.

Finally, when listeners in New York, Macon, and other American communities complained about excessive durations of Sunday ringing, they did not oppose the sound of church bells per se; they opposed a specific use of church bells—a communication practice—that had, over centuries, acquired particular associations and expectations. Associations and expectations for the churchgoing bell were different than those for the funeral or fire bell. Consequently, as the conditions of modernity furnished new ways of communicating and altered the cultural and physical contexts of listening, each practice injured and annoyed audiences in distinct ways. Americans faulted the fire bell (but not the funeral bell) for interfering with economic productivity. They never worried that the churchgoing bell would incite disorderly behavior from incidental audiences (for which the fire bell was notorious), and they never argued that the death knell or funeral bell (in contrast to the fire and churchgoing bells) were rendered obsolete by technological advances. And while complainants routinely accused the funeral bell of sending sick listeners to their graves by evoking melancholy thoughts, no one suspected the churchgoing bell of the same treachery; the churchgoing bell, everyone knew, killed sick listeners by “murdering” their sleep.⁷⁷

77. The churchgoing bell’s penchant for murdering sleep (a *modus operandi* appropriated from Act II of *Macbeth*) was common wisdom by the turn of the twentieth century. An early appropriation is found in Samuel Hazard’s account of his travels in Cuba: “[I]t will take some days for the uninitiated traveler to get accustomed to these bells, to which he might truthfully exclaim: ‘Sleep, there is no sleep; the bells (not Macbeth) have murdered sleep.’” Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Searle, 1873), 62.

Brazen Nuisance

Public complaints about church bells multiplied in the late decades of the nineteenth century, at approximately the same time that urban reformers began protesting a host of sounds they perceived to be harmful, needless, or annoying. Because noise abatement campaigns targeted church bells alongside the likes of factory whistles, street cars, and elevated trains, subsequent scholarship has assimilated complaints about church bells into broader narratives about the rise of industrial noise in Western cities. These narratives are about anxious audiences coming to terms with soundscapes transformed by sweeping modern change. They are stories about beginnings rather than endings, and the parts played by bells are therefore peripheral. Addressing the noise of church bells commonly serves either to illustrate the magnitude of urban commotion (i.e., modern cities grew so loud that inhabitants even complained about the sound of church bells) or to evoke a quieter, perpetual din from pre-industrial times. Churches had been employing bells in the same way for centuries, it is understood, when city dwellers—crowded into close proximity, assailed by the roar of mechanical innovations, and unsettled by the presence of ethnic, economic, and religious others—lashed out against a familiar sound.⁷⁸

Recognizing that listeners' grievances were practice-specific—that they addressed the unwanted sound, not of a religious artifact, but of multiple uses of bells with distinct associations—reframes the noise of church bells. To begin with, although late-nineteenth-

78. For representative scholarship, see Lawrence Baron, "Noise and Degeneration: Theodor Lessing's Crusade for Quiet," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1) (1982), 166-67; Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 163; Schafer, *Soundscape*, 175-76, 199-200; Schwartz, *Making Noise*, 301-14; Smilor, "Personal Boundaries in the Urban Environment: The Legal Attack on Noise 1865-1930," *Environmental Review* 3, no. 3 (1979), 29; Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, 20.

century audiences certainly took issue with the churchgoing bell specifically, they also protested when church bells sounded for other purposes. In sorting out the complaints, it is therefore important to distinguish between objections to a religious custom and objections to the use of bells for publishing the time or alerting firefighters. Secondly, opposition to particular practices emerged earlier than the late nineteenth century and according to varied schedules. Americans moved to suppress funeral tolling shortly after the Revolution, petitioned municipal authorities to regulate the churchgoing bell by the 1820s, and began to imagine fire alarms without bells by the late 1850s. Thirdly, although certain functions of bells persisted over centuries, bell practices and technologies did not stand still while the surrounding soundscape transformed. As the built environments of cities expanded, a burgeoning domestic foundry industry put bells within easier reach of churches, markets, fire companies, and schools. Larger bells supplanted smaller bells, and chimes replaced solitary bells. The diffusion of tolling hammers facilitated different methods of sounding, and striking mechanisms made it possible for clockwork, rather than the labor of a human bell ringer, to publish the time. Performance conventions and routines also changed, sometimes substantially. Finally, each practice elicited censure (and support) from multiple interested audiences as it departed. The reasons listeners gave when arguing for or against particular practices were complex: they implicated urbanization, industrialization, and secularization, but also context-specific spatial and personal relationships.

Here, I bring this more complicated perspective on the noise of bell practices to bear on larger conversations about the sources of modern noise and the politics of noise abatement. First, I reconsider the prevailing account of how modern noise manifested, a narrative that juxtaposes the din of industrial machines—the “diabolical symphony of the mechanical age,” in Karin Bijsterveld’s phrasing—with the presumably quieter, constant commotion of a pre-industrial soundscape.⁷⁹ I argue that the crescendo of noise from new and mechanical sources was less dramatic—and that the noise of pre-modern sources was less constant—than previous scholarship has appreciated. Secondly, I address perennial debates on the politics of noise abatement and explain how my own understanding of the issue has influenced—and been influenced by—my research on the decline of bell practices.

Against the Diabolical Symphony

First, it is important to acknowledge that conceptualizing noise is no easy thing. The authoritative effort is Hillel Schwartz’s *Making Noise*, a work that encompasses over twelve hundred pages (including 359 pages of downloadable endnotes) of insights, analyses, provocations, and poetry.⁸⁰ What is most remarkable about the book’s size is not

79. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 1, 113. The “diabolical symphony of the mechanical age” is the title of a seminal article by Karin Bijsterveld (revised for *Mechanical Sound*), adapted from an article by Shirley W. Wynne, New York City’s Commissioner of Health from 1928 to 1933. Karin Bijsterveld, “The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age: Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaigns, 1900-40” *Social Studies Of Science* 31, no. 1 (2001): 37–70; Shirley W. Wynne, “New York City’s Noise Abatement Commission,” *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 2, no. 1 (1930): 12–17.

80. Shannon Mattern’s excellent review of Schwartz’s book addresses the embodied experience of reading a text that is “also an object to be grappled with.” Shannon Mattern, “Review of Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*,” *Current Musicology* 93 (Spring 2012), 121.

that Schwartz said so much about noise, but that he managed to coherently say so much about noise—in so *few* pages—without taming it into a travesty. Understood broadly as unwanted or incomprehensible (although “never insignificant”) sound, noise is as expansive and complicated as the desirable or comprehensible varieties of sound it is defined against.⁸¹ Consequently, the vast universe of sounds unwanted by listeners is notoriously resistant to systematic classification. (Attempting to do so, Douglas Kahn advised, “will only invite noise on itself.”)⁸²

Identifying sources of sound that characterize the noise of a particular context is never a simple matter of following one’s ear to self-evident points of origin. Examine almost any inventory of noise, cataloged by its sources, and you will find an assortment of activities, events, contexts, technologies, and carbon-based life knocking about in non-

81. Scholars have defined noise more specifically in various ways for the purposes of analysis: as sound that contrasts or interferes with communication or music; as “sound out of place” (a play on Mary Douglas’ characterization of dirt as “matter out of place” [first made by Peter Bailey]) or sound out of time (belonging to an earlier era or sounding at an inconvenient moment); as sound that is too shrill or too loud; as sound that is dissonant or disorderly; and as sound made by unwanted Others. For an incomplete inventory, see Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, edited by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 122-24; Peter Bailey, “Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise,” *Body and Society*, 2, no. 2 (1996), 49-66, esp. 50 (For the original dirt on matter out of place, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [London: Routledge, 2001], 36); Baron, “Noise and Degeneration”; Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Soundhagood*; David Ellison, “All Shut Up: Carlyle and the Pursuit of Domestic Silence,” *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 15, no. 1 (2010): 36-46; Ruth Hachon, “Between Noise and Harmony: The Oratorical Moment in the Musical Entanglements of Jews and Christians,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2) (2006): 250-77; Hagood, “Quiet Comfort”; Peter Payer, “The Age of Noise: Early Reactions in Vienna, 1870-1914,” *Journal of Urban History*, 33, no. 5 (July 2007): 773-93; Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*; Lilian Radovac, “The ‘War on Noise’: Sound and Space in La Guardia’s New York,” *American Quarterly*, 63, no. 3 (2011): 733-60; Schafer, *Soundscape*; Ronda L. Sewald, “The Darker Side of Sound: Conflicts Over the Use of Soundscapes for Musical Performances,” (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2009); Ronda L. Sewald, “Forced Listening: The Contested Use of Loudspeakers for Commercial and Political Messages in the Public Soundscape,” *American Quarterly*, 63, no. 3 (2011): 761-80; Raymond W. Smilor, “Cacophony at 34th and 6th: The Noise Problem in America, 1900-1930,” *American Studies*, 18, no. 1 (1977): 23-38; Raymond Wesley Smilor, “Confronting the Industrial Environment: The Noise Problem in America, 1893-1912” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, 1978); Smilor, “Personal Boundaries in the Urban Environment”; Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, esp. Chapter 4; Valliant, “Peddling Noise,” 257-87; Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*; Yablon, “Echoes of the City.”

82. Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 21.

mutually exclusive categories at differing levels of abstraction. Consider a questionnaire distributed by the San Jose health department in March 1941, which instructed respondents to indicate the sources of noise that bothered them at specific hours and locations.

Barking dogs	Newsboys' cries
Crowing roosters	Auto cut-outs
Noisy parties	Auto horns
Loud speakers in home	Noisy trucking
Sirens: Ambulance-Fire	Other noises
Garbage collectors	

The questionnaire implicates newsboys (not publishers or the enterprise of news distribution) and garbage collectors (not garbage collection or municipal sanitation), while blaming sirens but absolving firefighters and ambulance personnel. Auto horns, not drivers or the privilege of personal transportation; noisy parties, not conversation or entertaining.⁸³ Sources of unwanted sound resist classification because the sonic and social elements of noise are inextricable; acoustic considerations are always hopelessly entangled with questions of who, why, how, when, and where. This dilemma is compounded by slippage between different meanings of *source*: where a noise “comes from” versus what it is “caused by.” Hypothetically, the same noise may be attributed to a jackhammer (a tool), a jackhammerer (the tool’s operator), the activity of jackhammering (using the tool), the site of jackhammering (e.g., the street), road work (the enterprise), or

83. “Noise Abatement Questionnaire,” *San Jose Evening News*, 19 March 1941, 1.

larger concerns such as economic development. Patterns of variation in the ways sources of noise are framed speak to cultural, contextual, and personal blind spots and biases.

The same challenges confounding the San Jose health department's assessment of noise at a particular moment also frustrate scholars' efforts to summarize the noise of larger eras. This is true of the prevailing account of modernity's noise, a narrative that posits dramatic changes in both the production and reception of unwanted sound with the Industrial Revolution's onset. Following R. Murray Schafer's narrative of lo-fi industrial din overwhelming the relative quiet of a hi-fi agrarian soundscape, subsequent scholars have described a transformation in the sources of sound moving audiences to complain. Unwanted sound has troubled listeners in all cultures and eras, it is generally agreed, but the sources of modernity's noise were categorically different. Karin Bijsterveld's introduction to *Mechanical Sound* is emblematic. During the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, Bijsterveld argued, complaints about urban noise in North America and Western Europe "increasingly focused on new technologies: on the sounds of factories, trains, steam tramways, automobiles, and gramophones."⁸⁴ On the face of it, this influx of complaints about new and mechanical sources seems self-evident; search for "city noise" in any nineteenth-century periodical database, and you will find an outcry against the sounds of recently diffused technologies.

84. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 1, 113. The "diabolical symphony of the mechanical age" is the title of a seminal article by Karin Bijsterveld (revised for *Mechanical Sound*), adapted from an article by Shirley W. Wynne, New York City's Commissioner of Health from 1928 to 1933. Karin Bijsterveld, "The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age: Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaigns, 1900-40" *Social Studies Of Science* 31, no. 1 (2001): 37-70; Shirley W. Wynne, "New York City's Noise Abatement Commission," *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 2, no. 1 (1930): 12-17.

But “new” is a moving target (of course no one complained about gramophones before they were in homes or about automobiles before they prowled the streets), and what constitutes a “mechanical” source of noise is far from straightforward. When the accommodating measures of new and mechanical are leveraged to define the sources of modern noise, they simultaneously evoke a contrasting din—of hollering, bellowing, crowing, clattering, and clanging—that is curiously timeless and often produced, in part, by church bells.

Among the most well-documented accounts of new and mechanical noise ascending in modernity’s soundscape is Emily Thompson’s analysis of New York City noise over the first three decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1930, Thompson argued, the composition of unwanted sound shifted from “organic” to “mechanical” sources: from “traditional” sounds “created by humans and animals at work and at play” to unfamiliar sounds made by new technologies.⁸⁵ Traditional/organic sounds, comprising “the constant sonic background that has always accompanied human civilization,” became more concentrated with urbanization, according to Thompson, but industrialization brought noise from new kinds of sources.⁸⁶ To demonstrate this shift, Thompson juxtaposed two historical assessments of New York noise: (1) an 1896 appeal

85. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 115-20 (quotations, 116-17). In September 2013, a revised version of Thompson’s *Soundscape of Modernity*, Chapter 4, was made available with the publication of an interactive digital project on the historical soundscape of 1920s New York City. Because the revisions do not alter the arguments and evidence I question here, I cite the original Chapter Four of Thompson’s 2002 book. For Thompson’s (amazing) interactive digital project on the New York City soundscape, see Emily Thompson, “The Roaring ‘Twenties: An Interactive Exploration of the Historical Soundscape of New York City,” designed by Scott Mahoy, *Vectors Journal*, September 2013. <http://vectorsdev.usc.edu/NYCsound/777b.html>.

86. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 116-17.

for quiet penned by physician and noise abatement crusader John Harvey Girdner, and (2) the results of a 1929 survey administered by the city's Noise Abatement Commission (NAC), a short-lived but industrious subsidiary of the municipal department of health.⁸⁷ By comparing the sources of noise identified by Girdner in 1896 with those assessed by the NAC three decades later, Thompson confirmed a striking transformation, from traditional/organic noise to noise that was "no longer organic at all."⁸⁸

Having examined the same evidence, I find the sources of noise described by Girdner and those measured by the NAC's survey to have more in common than Thompson recognized. The dissimilarities between our interpretations may be attributed, in part, to contrasting goals and perspectives: because Thompson's is a story about beginnings and mine is about endings, we attend to different aspects of the same evidence and approach it from different angles and at different scales. At times, we conceptualize the "source" of a sound differently. Other dissimilarities stem from the constraints of historical inquiry. Because we cannot question past subjects directly, we are doomed to construct our answers from whatever clues survive. As sources of evidence about past perception, Girdner's classification and (especially) the NAC's report are among the best to be hoped for, but there are limits to what can be known from comparing one physician's categorization of noise with an aggregate representation, solicited from

87. Edward F. Brown, E. B. Dennis, Jean Henry, G. Edward Pendray (Eds.), *City Noise* (New York: Department of Health, 1930); J. H. Girdner, "The Plague of City Noises," *North American Review*, September 1896: 296-303. For a history of the NAC's organization, activities, and accomplishments, see Smilor, "Confronting the Industrial Environment," 217-73.

88. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 117.

thousands of respondents three decades later. Some questions cannot be satisfyingly answered.

In his original article, Girdner sorted New York's undesirable sounds into the following six categories:

- 1.Noises produced by horses and wheeled vehicles.
- 2.Noises produced by street peddlers, beggars, street musicians, etc.
- 3.Noises produced by bells, whistles, clocks, etc.
- 4.Noises produced by animals other than horses, as cats, birds, etc.
- 5.All noises which come from the inside of our houses, as persons learning to play musical instruments, training the voice, etc., etc.
- 6.Explosives.⁸⁹

Thompson, in making a case that the noise of 1896 was overwhelmingly traditional/organic, summarized Girdner's categories as a five-item list: "horse-drawn vehicles, peddlers, musicians, animals, and bells." My first difference with Thompson is over paraphrasing: rendering "horses and wheeled vehicles" as "horse-drawn vehicles," I contend, misconstrues the noise of Girdner's first category. For in a subsequent paragraph, Girdner explained that the unwanted sounds of category 1 were made by "street cars, steam cars, elevated cars, and all kinds of carriages whether used for business or pleasure."⁹⁰ The machine-age wheeled vehicles clearly outpace those drawn by horses. Thompson seems to have considered and rejected this interpretation,

89. Girdner, "Plague of City Noises," 300. "Explosives" referred largely to those detonated during July 4 celebrations.

90. Girdner, "Plague of City Noises," 300.

explaining, in an endnote, that Girdner “did mention, but chose not to emphasize” the noise of street cars and elevated trains.⁹¹ Her reading is understandable: when expanding upon the noise of category 1, Girdner did choose to discuss sounds made by horse-drawn carts and carriages. This choice, however, is explained by the structure and aim of his article. Girdner addressed only one or two sources of noise at length from each category, for the express purpose of recommending how they might be quieted. The sources of noise Girdner emphasized, then, were not necessarily those he deemed most offensive; they were noises for which he could propose remedies. For category 1 noise, which Girdner deemed “largely necessary,” the sources of sound fitting this criterion were those associated with horse-drawn carts and carriages.⁹² A year later, when Girdner reflected upon the impact of his original article, he redesignated the noise of elevated trains and street cars as *un*-necessary and proposed a solution: putting these forms of transportation underground. At the same time, Girdner explicitly identified New York’s railroads as “the single greatest source of noise in the streets in which they are operated, and for half a block on either side,” adding that the elevated train was “the worst offender of all.”⁹³

Another consideration: although horses have pulled carts for millennia, some of the noises Girdner attributed to horse-drawn carts and carriages were dependent upon recent conditions. Before the early 1870s, when the city began paving streets with asphalt, for example, Girdner and other New Yorkers had never endured the “sudden and

91. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 117, 359n10 (quotation).

92. Girdner, “Plague of City Noises,” 300.

93. J. H. Girdner, “To Abate the Plague of City Noises,” *North American Review*, October 1897, 464 (quotation), 465.

ear-splitting sound” caused by a wheel passing over a loose cast-iron manhole cover on an “otherwise noiseless” asphalt-paved street.⁹⁴ Noises made by musicians (categories 2 and 5) were likewise less constant than might be supposed: brass and percussion instruments underwent significant modifications during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ronda L. Sewald has addressed the impact of these technological improvements on musical performances heard by audiences in the streets and in private homes. Brass street bands (among the loudest offenders at the time of Girdner’s article) were uncommon before the mid nineteenth century. Their proliferation quickly followed the availability of new valved instruments (coronets, horns, and tubas) that could execute the chromatic intervals needed to perform most popular melodies. Barrel organs, another frequent target of anti-noise crusaders like Girdner, were large and cumbersome until midway through the eighteenth century, when European makers devised portable models. These instruments were heard on American streets by the early decades of the nineteenth century, but they seldom incited public complaints before the 1830s. Similarly, the noise of music education “from the inside of our houses” (which Girdner tellingly segregated from the noise of street performers) was facilitated by the industrial production of upright pianofortes in the 1830s. This keyboard instrument, which was notably louder than its predecessors, became increasingly accessible to middle-class families (and a potential nuisance to their neighbors) as the nineteenth century progressed.⁹⁵ A similar observation may be made for some of the noise Girdner attributed to church bells. Although bells had

94. Girdner, “Plague of City Noises,” 301.

95. Sewald, “Darker Side of Sound,” 99-111, 165-170. Prior to the development of piston-valve technology, brass instruments (with the exception of the trombone) were constrained to playing overtones.

been used for centuries to publish the time, the technological and cultural conditions necessary for the clocks of multiple New York churches to interrupt Girdner's sleep, by "pounding out the hours" on their bells at night, were met after the Civil War.⁹⁶

Just as I find the noise described by Girdner to be less traditional and organic than Thompson concluded, I find the noise assessed by the NAC, three decades later, to be less new and mechanical. Upon comparing Girdner's categories of noise with the results of the NAC's survey, Thompson concluded that only seven percent of New Yorkers' complaints in 1929 "corresponded to the traditional sounds that Girdner had emphasized in 1896."⁹⁷ Thompson derived this remarkably small percentage from the 805 complaints about noisy parties, newsboys, peddlers, dogs, and cats classified generally by the NAC as "Vocal, Etc." (Figure 1.1.) The NAC's detailed tabulation of complaints, however, includes additional sources of noise cited by Girdner three decades earlier: elevated trains, street cars, horse-drawn trucks, whistles, and bells. Accounting for these sources raises the percentage of corresponding noise from seven to twenty-five percent. Further, consulting the NAC's full accompanying report raises the possibility of traditional/organic noise hiding within additional categories, such as the noise of deliveries and collections—which in the body of the report were described as careless. An etiquette

96. Before the nineteenth century, some church and government bells were struck by clockwork, but most communities paid a human bell ringer to interpret a clock and then ring a bell at designated hours, usually between two and four times a day. Striking mechanisms that transferred the work of publishing the time from human ringers to public clocks were more common by the 1830s, and during the height of the "public clock era" (which Alexis McCrossen places between 1870 and 1930) a number of New York churches installed clockwork mechanisms that sounded the Angelus, struck the hour, or marked the quarter hour with Westminster chimes. These machines, the vast majority of which were installed after the 1870s, could tirelessly disrupt the sleep of Girdner and other New Yorkers throughout the night without the intervention of a human bell ringer. Girdner, "Plague of City Noises," 301; McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times*, 25, also Chapter 4.

97. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 117 (quotation), 359n12.

lesson imparted by the city's Commissioner of Health, admonishing garbage collectors and milkmen to "refrain from shouting" while on their rounds, suggests that some of the 572 complaints about the noise of ash and garbage collection or the 451 complaints about the noise of ice and dairy distribution concerned the raised human voice. Similar advice, instructing residents to affix shock-absorbing materials to the bases of their ash cans, indicates that some of this unwanted sound was also caused by the impact of metal cans on hard sidewalks.⁹⁸

If all potentially organic noise is accounted for and all sources of noise referenced by Girdner are classified as traditional, the noise of recently invented technologies still accounts for more than two-thirds of the responses solicited by the NAC in 1929. Having acknowledged that new machines dominated the NAC survey's results, though, it is important to recognize that new machines also dominated the questionnaire.⁹⁹ (Figure 1.2.) Is it surprising that New Yorkers, when asked so directly to assess the noise of new machines, should respond by assessing the noise of new machines? Moreover, comparing the questionnaire with the detailed tabulation of responses brings to light several sources of noise that were recognized by the NAC after the fact. These sources did not appear on the printed form; rather, they were suggested by respondents in writing and submitted with completed questionnaires.¹⁰⁰ With the exception of 41 complaints about motorcycles,

98. Brown et al., *City Noise*, 25, 28, 221-22. Documentation made available by Thompson in conjunction with the "Roaring Twenties" project supports the idea that complaints about collection and deliveries frequently had to do with shouting and/or perceived careless behavior. See Thompson, "The Roaring 'Twenties."

99. Brown et al., *City Noise*, 25, 27. The questionnaire appeared in New York City area newspapers in mid-November 1929.

100. The version of the questionnaire published in the NAC's report invited respondents submit their suggestions in writing with their completed questionnaires. Newspapers such as the *Brooklyn Daily*

the noise New Yorkers thought of without a direct prompt came from traditional/organic sources: peddlers, dogs and cats, and restaurant dishwashing.¹⁰¹ The NAC plainly attributed city noise to machine-age technologies, but the make-up of write-in complaints raises the possibility that New York's inhabitants may have conceived noise differently.

Thompson's original analysis illustrates a shift in the sources of sound New Yorkers deemed unwanted. My own interpretation of the same evidence suggests that this shift was less dramatic than Thompson contended. There is little doubt, though, that New Yorkers' perceptions of noise changed substantially over the decades in question: complaints about sources of sound unheard of in 1896 comprise a majority of the responses solicited by the NAC in 1929. The narrative of industrial noise crescendoing above the din of a pre-industrial soundscape is problematic, not because it identifies new and mechanical sounds as the most salient to modernity, but because it consigns other sources of unwanted sound to a "constant sonic background."¹⁰² This steady (and suspiciously ahistorical) hum of humanity serves as a narrative foil for the diabolical symphony of machine-age noise to rise against. Traditional/organic sources of unwanted sound are thus not excluded from the story of modern noise; they are conscripted into a derivative role that is easily mistaken for their history.

Eagle added additional blank lines to the form and encouraged readers to note "any noises not printed in the list." "Here's Noise Questionnaire To Aid in Drive on City Din," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 November 1929, 7. For the version of the questionnaire printed in the NAC's report, see Brown et al., *City Noise*.

101. Although the questionnaire published in the NAC's report (reproduced here as Figure 1.2) did not prompt readers to consider additional sources of noise, newspapers such as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* added additional blank lines to the form and encouraged readers to note "any noises not printed in the list." "Here's Noise Questionnaire To Aid in Drive on City Din," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 November 1929, 7.

102. Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 117.

Unwanted sounds from sources not conventionally new or mechanical made up a larger, less stable, dimension of modernity's noise than previous scholarship has supposed. We should investigate how, why, and under what circumstances these neglected sources of sound vexed modern listeners, and we should also consider how the sounds, the listeners, and the vexation changed over time. Asking how bell practices evolved, before they descended into noise or faded into memory, contributes to this larger project.

The Intensity of Audible Relationships

Where, when, how, and by whom noise is apprehended, evaluated, and suppressed, Hillel Schwartz has argued, is “never so much a question of the intensity of sound as of the intensity of relationships: between deep past, past, and present, imagined or experienced; between one generation and the next, gods or mortals; between country and city, urb and suburb; between one class and another; between the sexes; between Neanderthals and other humans.”¹⁰³ These are the words I have returned to, again and again, while reading complaints about bell practices, sifting through theoretical perspectives on the politics of noise abatement, and probing the boundaries of hypothetical noise in my own thought experiments. I still have many questions. Here is what I have concluded (so far).

First, if noise is about relationships (and I agree with Schwartz that it is), the question of why listeners complain will seldom have a simple answer. Consequently, I

103. Schwartz, *Making Noise*, 20-21, 28.

have not attempted to identify a “real” or “most important” reason why American audiences opposed the noise of the funeral, fire, or churchgoing bell. Instead, I have approached each controversy with the goal of accounting for as many variables—and, by extension, relationships—as present themselves. These include:

- social and cultural factors: the class, ethnicity, sex, or religion of the parties sounding, authorizing, responding, or otherwise benefitting from a bell practice
- perceived properties of sound: volume, duration, pitch, timbre¹⁰⁴
- performance: manner of sounding (ringing, tolling, chiming), number of bells (a solitary bell vs. a chime or a ring), regularity (steady vs. erratic sounding)
- temporal, spatial, and material context: time of day, day of week, proximity to an offending belfry, the surrounding built environment
- interference with activities and routines: sleeping, listening, talking, concentrating
- physiological and psychological conditions of the complainant
- personal histories between complainants and the parties sounding the bell

Behind every conflict, if not every argument, were expectations regarding the purpose of the contested bell practice: the work it should accomplish and the associations it should evoke. These expectations were different for each practice, and they are especially important to consider when interpreting arguments based on utility or necessity.

In attributing complaints about unwanted sound to an array of context-specific variables, I have grappled with questions similar to those addressed by Ronda L. Sewald

104. Stephen McAdams and Albert Bregman remarked that timbre (sometimes called “tone color” or “texture”) “tends to be the psychoacoustician’s multidimensional waste-basket category for everything that cannot be labeled pitch or loudness.” Most definitions are indeed roundabout; the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, for example, defines timbre as “the character or quality of a musical sound or voice as distinct from its pitch and intensity.” From an auditory perspective, it is the quality by which a blindfolded listener would distinguish between a trumpet and a bagpipe, if both instruments played a note of the same pitch and volume. Stephen McAdams and Albert Bregman, “Hearing Musical Streams,” *Computer Music Journal* 3, no. 4 (December 1979), 34; *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 2013).

regarding the politics of noise abatement. The prevailing model for understanding conflicts over unwanted sound, Sewald pointed out, conceives both noisemaking and noise abatement as political activities: subjugated groups employ sound strategically in expressions of resistance and protest, and powerful institutions and persons seek to stifle less powerful dissonant voices. Extreme proponents of this view (Sewald cited Jacques Attali's *Noise* as the seminal articulation) understand noise abatement as an activity invariably perpetrated by powerful actors upon disempowered noisemakers. Taken further, complaints about unwanted sound are ultimately about unwanted people, and to implicate other factors lends validity to intolerant and prejudiced positions. Citing counter-examples from previous scholarship as well as her own research on soundscape conflicts, Sewald identified three additional distributions of power in past noise abatement activities: (1) professional and middle-class reformers opposing noise to protect the hearing of lower-class factory workers, (2) neighbors of similar demographics contesting the boundaries of private soundscapes, and (3) demographically diverse captive audiences, such as public transit riders, seeking relief from music and messages delivered by corporate and political interests.¹⁰⁵ Further, while acknowledging that forms of bigotry are clearly implicated in many noise abatement efforts, Sewald cautioned against assuming that all complaints about noise invariably spring from intolerance or prejudice, arguing that a variety of sonic, contextual, and personal factors may influence how a listener interprets a sound. In particular, Sewald emphasized that sound—

105. Sewald, "Darker Side of Sound," esp. 1-37, 477-81; Sewald, "The Untidy Reality of Complaints About Music," *Anthropology News* 51 (9) (December 2010); Sewald, "Forced Listening."

especially at loud volumes, extreme frequencies, or lengthy durations—is capable of inflicting measurable physical and psychological harm.¹⁰⁶

Distributions of power in conflicts over bell practices varied. Confrontations over the churchgoing bell were often waged by parties of similar demographics. The first lawsuit brought against church bells in the US (addressed in Chapter 5) was filed against a wealthy Episcopal congregation by a contingent of neighbors predominated by wealthy Episcopalians—several of whom paid pew rent to the defendants. Efforts to silence the funeral and fire bells hew more closely to the model of powerful institutions suppressing less powerful noise makers, with an important caveat. The privilege of sounding a bell—for any reason—was regulated closely by political and religious authorities, and, with the exception of death knells and funeral tolling, bells sounded on behalf of collectives rather than individuals. Consequently, the noisemakers criticized for sounding bells were significantly less vulnerable than street musicians, peddlers, or other disempowered groups regularly targeted by noise abatement efforts.¹⁰⁷ But thinking in terms of opposing sides, squaring off against each other in orderly battles, misses the combat style of conflicts over bells. They are better described as opportunistic skirmishes. Almost always, more than two interests entered (or were pulled into) the fray, and participants often argued for or against practices for different reasons. At times, persons and

106. Sewald extensively reviews the harmful possibilities of sound in Chapter 2 of her dissertation. See Sewald, “Darker Side of Sound.”

107. R. Murray Schafer cited the sound of church bells as the seminal example of “Sacred Noise”: sound made without fear of censure. According to Schafer, secular industrialists acquired this privilege with the arrival of modernity, and this led to the demise of the hi-fi soundscape with its favorable signal-to-noise ratio. Isaac Weiner developed Schafer’s concept of Sacred Noise extensively when interpreting late-nineteenth-century controversies over the sound of US church bells. Schafer, *Soundscape*, 76; Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, Chapters 1-2.

institutions who adamantly opposed each other on many matters found common ground on the subject of discontinuing or defending bell practices.

Whether attempts to silence unwanted sound are always or only motivated by intolerance is a question I leave to philosophers. Complaints prompted exclusively by either social prejudice or sonic excess are difficult to find outside the rarefied plane of hypothetical scenarios. Nineteenth-century Americans seldom expressed their views on the volume, timing, duration, or aesthetics of bell practices without commenting on the morality, fortitude, piety, intelligence, industriousness, or sobriety of members of a class, ethnicity, sex, religion, political party, or generation. My goal, in investigating past disputes over the funeral, fire, and churchgoing bells, is to better comprehend the complex, messy, and partially articulated relationships between social, sonic, and contextual factors and to understand how varieties of intolerance and prejudice have manifested in disputes about noise.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two provides an overview of Americans' pre-Revolution sounding methods and interpretive habits before examining the mechanisms through which tower bells' participation in political celebrations and protests contributed to an emerging protonational consciousness. British Americans sounded bells to command attention, convey information, move listeners to action. The same ringing and tolling that assembled inhabitants for political demonstrations also represented the assent or dissent

of multiple constituencies. It served as the voice of event organizers, telling listeners how they should think and feel on a given occasion; it represented the consent of municipal and religious authorities, who controlled access to bells (or indicated that organizers had circumvented these authorities); and it represented the community's voice to distant readers, as printed accounts of demonstrations circulated.

Chapter Three compares the decline of death knells and funeral bells. Unlike the fire or churchgoing bell, death knells and funeral bells sounded in response to biographical events in the lives of individuals. Despite obvious similarities, the two practices elicited different responses from audiences: both conveyed information to listeners, but the funeral bell also summoned those listeners to congregate and move through public space. Consequently, the death knell largely evaded written record before slipping quietly into memory, while communities regulated the funeral bell before banishing it from local soundscapes.

Chapter Four compares the uses and eventual disengagement of tower bells from fire alarm systems in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. From within these systems, bells directed labor, resources, and (sometimes) mischief to the locations of fires. As populations swelled and municipal territories expanded, cities reconfigured their alarm systems, enabling the fire bell to direct responders to increasingly precise geographic locations. For all this precision in indicating geographic location, the fire bell was never able to address a selected audience, which is why it was eventually silenced. As cities

entrusted the work of extinguishing fires to small and specialized workforces, the fire bell continued to alarm everyone.

Chapter Five examines Americans' evolving understandings of the churchgoing bell's purpose, audiences, and meanings, beginning with early controversies in the 1820s and ending with the first lawsuit to restrain the use of church bells for assembling religious congregations.

TABULATION OF NOISE COMPLAINTS — MARCH 1, 1930		
SOURCE	NUMBER	PERCENT
Trucks—Motor	1,125	10.16
Automobile Horns	1,087	9.81
Radios—Homes	774	7.00
Elevated Trains	731	6.62
Radios—Street & Stores	593	5.36
Automobile Brakes	583	5.27
Ash & Garbage Collections	572	5.17
Street Cars	570	5.16
Automobile Cut-Outs	504	4.55
Fire Department Sirens and Trucks	455	4.12
Noisy Parties and Entertainments	453	4.10
Milk and Ice Deliveries	451	4.07
Riveting	373	3.37
Subway Turnstiles	317	2.86
Buses	271	2.45
Trucks—Horse Drawn	268	2.41
Locomotive Whistles and Bells	238	2.15
Pneumatic Drills—Excavations	233	2.11
Tug & Steamship Whistles	223	2.01
Pneumatic Drills—Streets	213	1.93
Newsboys and Peddlers	212	1.91
Subway Trains	183	1.65
Dogs and Cats	140	1.26
Traffic Whistles	137	1.24
Factories	117	1.06
Airplanes	113	1.02
Boats	66	0.59
Motorcycles	41	0.37
Restaurant Dishwashing	25	0.22
	11,068	100.00
CLASSIFICATION		
SOURCE	NUMBER	PERCENT
TRAFFIC (Trucks, Automobile Horns, Cut-Outs, Brakes, Buses, Traffic Whistles, Motorcycles)	4,016	36.28
TRANSPORTATION (Elevated, Street Cars, Subway)	1,081	16.29
RADIOS (Homes, Streets, & Stores)	1,367	12.34
COLLECTIONS & DELIVERIES (Ash, Garbage, Milk, Ice)	1,023	9.25
WHISTLES & BELLS (Fire Dept., Locomotives, & Tugs & Steamships)	916	8.28
CONSTRUCTION (Riveting, Pneumatic Drills)	819	7.40
VOCAL, ETC. (Newsboys, Peddlers, Dogs, Cats, Noisy Parties)	805	7.27
OTHERS	321	2.89
	11,068	100.00

Figure 1.1. Reproduction of a table published in March 1930 by the New York Noise Abatement Commission, displaying the tabulated responses to a survey conducted the previous fall. Sources of noise counted as organic/traditional by Emily Thompson (2002) are in bold text. Sources of noise identified by J. H. Gidner in 1896 are highlighted. (For the original tabulation and classification, see Edward F. Brown, E. B. Dennis, Jean Henry, and G. Edward Pendray, *City Noise* [New York: Department of Health, 1930], 27.)

Use a soft pencil in filling out questionnaire. Under Location give the address of the source of noises most annoying to you, and under Hour state the time at which these noises are noticed by you. (Examples: Ash and garbage collection—322 Main st.—6 a.m. Loud speakers in home—Same address—12:30 a.m.). In the blank spaces provided give any noises not printed in list.

SOURCE OF NOISE	LOCATION	HOURL
Loud speakers in homes
Automobile horns
Trucks—Horse drawn
Trucks—Motor
Busses—Noisy mechanism or tires
Automobile cut-outs
Noisy brakes on automobiles
Riveting
Pneumatic drills on streets
Pneumatic drills on excavations
Loud speakers outside of stores
Airplanes
Noisy parties
Locomotive whistles and bells
Tug and steamship whistles
Elevated trains
Subway trains
Subway turnstiles
Street cars
Ash and garbage collections
Newsboys cries
Unmuffled motorboats
Traffic whistles
Fire Department sirens and trucks
Milkmen
Factories
.....
.....
.....
What one noise is most annoying?

If you have suggestions to offer write a letter and attach it to your questionnaire.

Signed

Address

NOTE—Your name and address will not be used publicly in any way or at any time.

Figure 1.2. Reproduction of questionnaire distributed in New York newspapers by the city's Noise Abatement Commission, reproduced here as it appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on November 11, 1929. A comparison of this questionnaire with the NAC's final tabulation of responses (Figure 1) shows four sources of noise identified solely from respondents' write-in complaints: peddlers, dogs and cats, motorcycles, and restaurant dishwashing.

CHAPTER TWO

Assembling and Representing the People¹⁰⁸

At the Dawn of Day...my bell began & continued ringing till Sunrise. About nine o'clock A.M. The bell of the first Congreg[ational] Ch[urch] began to ring & rang an hour or two. The Episc[opal] Ch[urch] bell struck a few strokes and then stopped, the Episcopalians being averse to the Celebration.

— Ezra Stiles, *Diary*, March 18, 1769¹⁰⁹

At five o'clock on the afternoon of March 2, 1775, the inhabitants of Providence, Rhode Island, demonstrated their commitment to the nonconsumption of British imports by paying respects to one “Madam Souchong.” The event, as reported in the *Providence Gazette*, featured a heady combination of symbolic protest and crowd action. While enthusiastic participants consigned loyalist newspapers and their personal stores of East India tea to the flames of a large bonfire, a Son of Liberty reiterated the message by effacing the word *tea* on shop signs. In keeping with the funerary theme, the sound of tolling bells accompanied the proceedings, “but,” the *Gazette* commented in a sly aside, “it is referred to the Learned whether tolling or ringing would have been most proper.”¹¹⁰

Neither the use of bells in such a fashion nor its mention in print was uncommon in British North America on the eve the Revolution. Bells sounded at numerous political demonstrations, and descriptions of their use at these events often made the pages of local

108. Significant parts of this chapter were published as “Joyful Ringing, Solemn Tolling: Methods and Meanings of Early American Tower Bells” *William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (October 2012): 823–842.

109. Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 7.

110. “Mr. Carter,” *Providence Gazette*, March 4, 1775.

newspapers. The *Gazette*'s narrative is of interest because its tongue-in-cheek humor calls attention to an overlooked element of eighteenth-century culture: the juxtaposition of tolling and ringing was witty because contemporary readers understood tolling and ringing to be different methods with distinct cultural meanings. Listeners in Providence on March 2 recognized that the bells tolled, and readers of the *Philadelphia Evening Post*, learning of the demonstration three weeks later, contrasted tolling (a method usually reserved for solemn or sorrowful occasions) with ringing (a method used for a variety of purposes, ranging from curfews to public celebrations) to conclude that the patriotic people of Providence had burned their tea without remorse.¹¹¹

This chapter has two purposes. The first is to thickly describe how British Americans sounded and listened to church bells. Historians have enumerated the types of occasions on which bells sounded, and they have acknowledged that bells contributed to a symbolic “vocabulary of celebration” shared by British subjects on both sides of the Atlantic. What remain largely unexplored are the production, perception, and interpretation of bell practices in particular contexts.¹¹² When colonial Americans heard a bell sound, they considered the method of sounding (whether the bell rang, tolled, or chimed), local habits and conventions, and information from other sources. They

111. “Providence, March 4,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Evening Post*, March 23, 1775. I use the term *method* throughout this chapter to indicate a general technique or way of sounding bells, such as ringing or tolling. The meaning specific to the tradition of scientific change ringing, to indicate an algorithm that guides a team of ringers through a series of permutations, is not intended.

112. David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Stroud, U.K., 2004), 67–92 (quotation, 67); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997), 16, 26, 34, 37; Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), 50–51; Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass., 1997), 18–20, 26, 35–37, 40, 43, 53–54; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997), 30–31, 36–37.

recognized the timbre of specific bells, complained about the performance of particular ringers, and knew which bell should sound—and by what method—at a given time during the day or week. Revising the nuances preserved in firsthand accounts can eliminate cues that contemporary ears strained to detect. Substituting vocabulary in a retelling of the Providence tea burning—stating that “the bells of the city rang out” rather than tolled, for example—renders bells’ part in the protest nonsensical and flattens the Gazette’s joke.¹¹³

The second purpose of this chapter is to examine the mechanisms through which bell practices contributed to an emerging protonational consciousness. Scholarship that has painstakingly analyzed other elements of colonial American political ritual has assigned bells to a role that is thinly elaborated yet powerful enough, in conjunction with other forms of symbolic expression, to ratify the transfer of political power, establish liminal time and space annually on Independence Day, and otherwise contribute to the emergence of an American national identity. Among the boldest of these claims is Richard Cullen Rath’s assertion that “the nation was a community imagined into being sonically from the bottom up” by bells, trumpets, and drums “as much as it was visually imagined from the top down through mass print culture.”¹¹⁴ Declaring bells bottom-up media, in contrast to print, and on the antecedent side of a purported sensory shift from auditory to visual dominance, elides the very complexities that made bells useful for

113. T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford, 2004), 311.

114. Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 176 (quotations), 50–51. See also Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 43; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 30–31; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 178.

expressing and promoting political solidarity and dissent. But Rath is correct: as key components of communication networks and tools for symbolic expression, bells *did* help to sound the nation into being. In the first capacity, ringing and tolling galvanized public attention, conveyed messages, and moved listeners to action. In the second capacity, ringing and tolling represented the approval or dissent of a community's inhabitants; the voice of organizers, indicating how listeners should think and feel; and the consent of municipal and religious authorities, who controlled access to bells. Because bells commanded attention, motivated audiences, and represented authority, they enabled local organizers to assemble the people for political demonstrations, and ringing and tolling lent legitimacy to both local events and to accounts that circulated in print.

Sounding

The English-language vocabulary associated with sounding bells is not especially expansive, but the meaning of a handful of key terms—*ring*, *peal*, *chime*—can vary by context and part of speech. This is the case now, and it was the case in eighteenth-century British America. Consider the word *peal*, which colonists used to reference (1) a tower instrument comprised of multiple tuned bells; (2) the act of sounding out, performed by one or more bells; (3) a unit of performance, defined generally as an uninterrupted duration of ringing or tolling, or (4) roughly five thousand unique sequences on a set of eight bells (the *peal* of definition 1) performed by eight ringers.¹¹⁵ Theoretically, a *peal* could be *pealed* on a *peal*. To further complicate matters, certain terms enjoyed some

115. The fourth definition is specific to the English tradition of change ringing.

interchangeability. The eight bells in the steeple of Philadelphia's Christ Church, for example, were alternately referred to as a "peal," a "ring," and, less frequently, a "chime" of bells, as were similar instruments in Boston and Charleston. The same license did not extend to terms specifying the various methods of sounding bells or describing the sounds produced. Reading isolated accounts of celebrations and protests may leave an impression that ringing and tolling were indistinguishable and that British Americans used the terms *ringing* and *tolling* indiscriminately to reference any sound made by bells, but when larger patterns of usage are accounted for, it is evident that newspaper editors, church wardens, and diarists alike listened attentively and selected their words deliberately.

Establishing the relationships among contemporary vocabulary, the work of bell ringers, and technology inside bell and ringing chambers is challenging. Debates about the feasibility of recovering past sensory experience have centered around the constructedness of perception, but reproducing or re-imagining past sounds to establish the relationships between contemporary vocabulary and the work of humans and technology inside belfries can also prove formidable.¹¹⁶ Consider the report, published by the *Salem Gazette* on June 14, 1799, that "the bells in this town were tolled on the

116. For discussions of the feasibility of recovering past sensory experience, see Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore, 2003), 1-21; Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 2-3, 43-46; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999), 49-95; Mark M. Smith, "Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007), 850-52.

afternoon of the funeral of Gov. Sumner.”¹¹⁷ How precisely can we reconceive what inhabitants heard on this occasion? The diary of William Bentley, minister of Salem’s East Church, provides a specific time and duration of tolling on the afternoon in question (from three to four o’clock), and a municipal regulation published in 1790 stipulates a rate of four strokes per minute for funeral tolling. A bell sounding once every fifteen seconds over the course of an hour is easy enough to imagine. Yet further exploration of Bentley’s diary suggests that the East Church’s bell did *not* toll at a rate of four strokes per minute on the afternoon of Increase Sumner’s funeral, even if other bells did. An entry regarding a contentious discussion at a town meeting three years before the governor’s death suggests that all churches did not warmly receive or dutifully implement the the pace prescribed by the ordinance. More telling is an entry from January 1813, in which Bentley recorded the following milestone: “This day for the first time the passing bell instead of the continual toll was used with the interval strokes. The East Bell having hitherto retained the old method of striking with the ringing rope incessantly & not with the chiming rope at intervals.” Seemingly simple phrases, such as “the bells in this town were tolled,” harbor considerable variability. Even with a wealth of detail provided by a contemporary listener who had privileged access to a belfry, it is difficult to know with certainty how the 583-pound bell of Salem’s East Church sounded, together with the town’s other bells, when it tolled on the afternoon of Wednesday, June 12, 1799.¹¹⁸

117. “Salem, Friday, June 14, 1799,” *Salem Gazette*, June 14, 1799. The funeral was held in Boston, where the bells were ordered to toll twice on the day of the funeral: from seven to eight o’clock in the morning and from one o’clock in the afternoon to the close of the funeral. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston, various dates), 33:22.

118. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Salem, Mass., 1907), 2:175, 312, 377, 4:145; “Expenses of Funerals Regulated,” *Salem Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1790.

As Bentley's account suggests, bells could be tolled in more than one way, with different techniques producing different results. Many bells in eighteenth-century towers, including the bell of Salem's East Church, were hung to allow for full-circle ringing. The bell was fixed to a beam (the headstock), which rested on a supporting frame by means of gudgeons (pins used for mounting) fitted into bearings. The addition of a grooved wheel, fixed to the headstock and bored through at the rim, allowed a rope to pass through the hole (called a "fillet") and fasten to the wheel's spokes. A pulley enabled a ringer to set the bell in motion from beneath the bell chamber. With a wooden stay fixed to the headstock and a sliding mechanism attached to the frame beneath to catch the stay, an experienced ringer could swing a bell back and forth through successive arcs of approximately 360 degrees, balancing the bell indefinitely in an upturned position between revolutions (Figure 2.1). When a bell is rung full-circle in this way, the clapper moves upward to strike the bell's sound bow in the instant before the bell completes its revolution, then rests on the sound bow through the next revolution until the moment of striking (Figure 2.2).

Swinging a bell full-circle is most closely associated with change ringing, an English tradition dating to the turn of the seventeenth century in which a team of ringers, with one ringer per bell rope, performs mathematical permutations (called changes) on a ring of bells.¹¹⁹ The control afforded by this technique meant it could be used to produce

119. For an overview of change ringing tradition and practice, see Paul Cattermole, *Church Bells and Bell-Ringing: A Norfolk Profile* (Suffolk, 1990); Ron Johnston, *Bell-Ringing: The English Art of Change-Ringing* (New York, 1986); Elizabeth E. Wein, "Part of the Pattern: Class and Society Reflected in the English Art of Change Ringing" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994).

the measured strokes required for funeral tolling.¹²⁰ Tolling in this manner requires a properly hung bell, an experienced ringer, well maintained equipment, and planning. A bell must be “rung up” (swung back and forth through progressively large arcs until balancing in an upturned position) in advance of tolling, because ringing up is a noisy procedure that can take a full minute or more, depending on the size of the bell.¹²¹

Churches looked for other ways to produce a suitable effect. One option was to carefully swing the bell through a small arc so that the clapper made contact with only one side of the sound bow. Strokes could not be precisely timed every fifteen seconds, but they were spaced at longer intervals than if the clapper struck the bell from both directions. This is likely the “old method of striking with the ringing rope incessantly” that Salem’s East Church left behind in 1813. The new arrangement for tolling with “the chiming rope at intervals” almost certainly involved moving the clapper or a hammer to strike the stationary bell, as opposed to setting the bell in motion. “Clappering” or “clocking,” denounced in treatises as an efficient way of cracking a bell, entailed hitching a rope around the clapper’s flight so that it might be pulled against the bell’s sound bow at intervals of the ringer’s choosing.¹²² A second technique used a lever, with a hammer attached to one end and a rope attached to the other, to enable controlled striking from

120. “Ringing the Bells round at a set Pull, thereby keeping them up so as to delay their striking” is one of two techniques recommended for funerals in John Doleman and C. M.’s classic treatise on the art of change ringing, first published in 1702. John Doleman and C. M., *Campanalogia Improved: Or, the Art of Ringing Made Easy*, 4th ed. (London, 1753), 201.

121. Clappers may also be tethered during the ringing up process and released for tolling.

122. Edmund Beckett Denison, *A Rudimentary Treatise on Clocks and Watches and Bells* (London, 1868), 363-64, 414; E. H. W. Dunkin, “The Church Bells of Cornwall: Their Archaeology and Present Condition,” *Reliquary*, July 1873, 15; Henry Thomas Ellacombe, *Chiming: An Appendix to the Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers* (London, 1860), 12; Henry Thomas Ellacombe, *Bells of the Church: A Supplement to the “Church Bells of Devon”* (Exeter, 1872), 25, 203n3; Arthur H. Nichols, “The Early Bells of Paul Revere,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (April 1904), 154; Henry Beauchamp Walters, *Church Bells* (London, 1908), 150-52.

beneath the bell chamber. Like clapping, this arrangement could damage a bell, particularly if the mechanism was accidentally engaged while the bell was swinging by means of wheel and rope. In circumstances where striking one side of the sound bow required too much skill or a tolling mechanism could not be rigged, a third option was to climb into the bell chamber and strike the sound bow manually with a hammer—also an efficient way of cracking a bell.

Like tolling, ringing could be executed in more than one way. Although a majority of bells were hung for full-circle ringing, it is unlikely that these were always rung full-circle, as a complete revolution is not necessary for the clapper to strike both sides of a bell's sound bow. A partial revolution requires less effort, and related evidence indicates that sextons were interested in reducing the labor of ringing. One tactic popular by the turn of the nineteenth century was to bolt a counterweight to a bell's headstock, causing the whole apparatus to operate more like a turning wheel than a swinging pendulum. Bells modified in this way were easier to move through a partial arc, but full-circle ringing was difficult if not impossible. Another alteration that eased the work of ringing was to raise or "tuck up" the bell higher on the headstock, which shifted the center of gravity closer to the axis of rotation.¹²³ Both counterbalancing and raising a bell on its headstock could cause the clapper to heave upward before falling onto the sound bow instead of rising up to strike. These modifications aside, available evidence suggests that many early bells did ring full-circle when the necessary technology and skill were in

123. For an explanation of counterbalancing, see Arthur H. Nichols, "The Bells of Paul and Joseph W. Revere," *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute*, 47, no. 4 (October 1911), 299. American founders incorporated both counterbalancing and raised yokes into their designs during the nineteenth century, prompting a British bell authority to observe that bells hung in this manner could "be jangled, but nothing more." Ellacombe, *Bells of the Church*, 343.

place. Records of payments to ringers, time allotted for rehearsal, indentations on the floors of ringing chambers, and firsthand accounts of ringing on occasions of public celebration indicate that changes (or an approximation thereof) were attempted on the rings in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston.¹²⁴

Chiming was a term used infrequently during the eighteenth century, usually (although not exclusively) to reference performances on the three rings in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston. By the mid-nineteenth century, in the United States the word denoted a particular method of striking stationary tuned bells to produce simple melodies.¹²⁵ What earlier Americans meant by the term is less clear. It is possible that *chiming* was synonymous with *ringing* for describing the sounds produced by tower instruments with multiple bells. This is a plausible interpretation of John Adams' report that on July 8, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was publicly read in Philadelphia, "[t]he bells rang all day and almost all night. Even the chimers chimed away." Here *chiming* might be understood as a subset of ringing, mentioned to draw attention to the participation of Christ Church.¹²⁶ Yet on other occasions *chiming* and *ringing* unquestionably referred to methods that listeners could easily distinguish. When post-war violence threatened the peace in Charleston, for example, the city council

124. Benjamin Dorr, *A Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia, from Its Foundation, A. D. 1695, to A. D. 1841* (New York, 1841), 111; Louis P. Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 231-32; Arthur Howard Nichols, "Christ Church Bells, Boston, Mass.," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Jan. 1904), 70-71; George W. Williams, *St. Michael's, Charleston, 1751-1951: With Supplements 1951-2001* (Columbia, S. C., 1951), 240-41, 252-57.

125. In England at the same time, *chiming* did not indicate the performance of tunes, but rather the practice of tolling more than one bell simultaneously. See Henry Thomas Ellacombe, "Chiming, Tolling, and Pealing," *Notes and Queries*, May 31, 1851, 432.

126. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston, 1854), 9:420. The vestry and congregation of Christ Church were perceived by some to be ambivalent toward the patriot cause. See Deborah Mathias Gough, *Christ Church, Philadelphia: The Nation's Church In a Changing City* (Philadelphia, 1995), 135-45.

exploited the difference between chiming and ringing to establish contrasting signals for riots and fires: “In case of a Riot, the largest Bell of St. Michael’s Church will be rung singly. On account of Fire, there will be a Chime of two or more of the Bells.”¹²⁷

Firsthand accounts that relate effects out of keeping with what might result from ringing provide additional clues as to how chiming may have been executed. Consider Johann David Schoepf’s description of performances at Christ Church in Philadelphia: “The bells are so played that the eight single notes of the octave are several times struck, descending, rapidly one after the other,—and then the accord follows in tercet and quint, ascending; and so repeated.”¹²⁸ Cascading scales are characteristic of change ringing, but it is quite difficult for two or more ringers to swing hundreds of pounds of metal around to strike clappers “in accord.” Schoepf’s account suggests that performers may have found a way to manipulate clappers or hammers to strike stationary bells. Perhaps *chiming* described the synchronous, as opposed to sequential, sounding of more than one bell.¹²⁹

In the context of political ceremony, ringing and chiming served as unambiguous expressions of joy. Tolling, however, was more open to interpretation, as was the related technique of ringing a “dumb” or muffled peal by fixing a piece of leather to the bell’s

127. “Notice. The following Distinction has been established by the City Council...” *Charleston South-Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, July 10 to 13, 1784, [4].

128. Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784*, trans. Alfred J. Morrison (Philadelphia, 1911), 68.

129. The Guild of Carillonneurs in North America dates the first known chimestand (a keyboard-like device that enabled a single performer to sound multiple bells) to an 1805 mechanism installed at St. Michael’s Church in Charleston, but an advertisement for a runaway slave who was “much accustomed to chiming the New Church Bells, especially on rejoicing days” suggests that St. Michael’s bells were chimed by other means at least a decade earlier. “Milestones in North American Chimes and American Bellfounding,” Guild of Carillonneurs in North America: <http://www.gcna.org/data/MstonesNASM.html>; “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Charleston City Gazette*, April 4, 1796.

clapper. Muffling produced a dull, subdued effect that, like tolling, contrasted with the sound of unsuppressed ringing.¹³⁰ Although tolling and muffled ringing ostensibly expressed the sorrow of loyal British subjects, the methods might also indicate displeasure and even disrespect, applications colonists could read about in news reprinted from English periodicals. One account that circulated widely in the fall of 1757 described the unhappy reception of Admiral Edward Hawke in Portsmouth, England, after his ignominious withdrawal from the blockade at Rochefort, France, including the detail that “the Ringers saluted [him] with a dumb Peal.”¹³¹ London politicians were also, on occasion, treated to dumb peals, which usually coincided with crowd actions. To stamp distributors, tea consignees, or members of groups perceived to be lukewarm toward the patriot cause, then, tolling and muffled ringing could sound menacing. It is little wonder that the muffled ringing of Pennsylvania’s state house bell (now better known as the Liberty Bell) featured prominently in the resignation letter tendered by that province’s stamp distributor. John Hughes explained that the muffled ringing, along with muffled drumming and word of mouth, had collected “Great Numbers of People,” who demanded his resignation and presented a conspicuous threat to his person and property.¹³²

130. Ringing bells with muffled clappers is a method, in addition to full-circle tolling, recommended for funerals in Doleman and C. M.’s treatise on the art of change ringing. Doleman and C. M., *Campanalogia Improved*, 201-02.

131. “Extract of a Letter from Portsmouth, October 9,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 8, 1757; “Extract of a Letter from Portsmouth, October 9,” *New York Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1757; “Mr. Prior’s Thought, a Little Altered,” *Boston News Letter*, Dec. 15 to 22, 1757; “Extract of a Letter from Portsmouth, Octob. 9,” *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, Dec. 23, 1757; “Extract of a Letter from an Officer in the Late Expedition,” *Boston Evening Post*, Dec. 26, 1757. The wording of a retrospective account, republished three years later from a London magazine, was more direct: Hawke had been “insulted by a dumb peal.” “From the Gentleman’s Magazine published the 1st of March...” *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, July 25, 1760.

132. John Hughes to John Penn, 8 October 1765, Pennsylvania Stamp Act and Non-Importation Resolutions Collection, Manuscripts Related to the Stamp Act Agitation, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

Listening

Distinctions between ringing, tolling, and chiming matter because method was an important cue listeners considered when interpreting the sounds made by bells. In the eighteenth century, ringing and tolling in particular were each associated with specific occasions. Most communities used ringing to mark the passage of time, to open markets, to summon churchgoers to religious services and civic leaders to meetings, and to call inhabitants to mutual assistance in moments of danger. Ringing was also the method used for veneration and celebration: to observe the king's (and later the president's) birthday, to honor the arrival of important figures, to mark significant dates such as Christmas Eve and the anniversary of the thwarted Gunpowder plot, and to respond to news of military and political victories. Bells were tolled when circumstances called for a signal distinguishable from ringing or for strokes that could be counted. Combinations of ringing and tolling were sometimes used to alert listeners to impending events and then signal the events' commencement. For example, preliminary ringing apprised seventeenth-century Harvard students of approaching religious services, recitations, and meals before tolling indicated that these activities were underway.¹³³ Tolling was also used to broadcast simple codes. In some New England towns, such as Newbury, Massachusetts, a number of tolled strokes equal to the day of the month followed the ringing of the evening curfew bell.¹³⁴ Apart from a handful of community-specific

133. Arthur H. Nichols, "Bells of Harvard College," *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, June 1912, 617-18. By the early nineteenth century, many churches had adopted similar combinations of ringing and tolling for assembling their congregations.

134. John J. Currier, *History of Newbury, Mass., 1635-1902*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1902), 334. See also L. Elsinore Springer, *That Vanishing Sound* (New York, 1976), 139; Henry R. Stiles, *The History of Ancient*

secondary uses, however, the measured strokes of tolling were overwhelmingly associated with death and burial.

In addition to associating ringing with joy and tolling with solemn occasions, listeners relied on a familiarity with local conventions. They differentiated bells according to pitch and timbre, and they noticed when a particular bell sounded at a time outside familiar routines. Because ringing was the method most eighteenth-century towns used for fire alarms, unanticipated ringing invariably prompted immediate investigation.¹³⁵ A spontaneous celebration of good news or a meeting convened at an unusual time could throw communities into a state of temporary consternation. Even the wrong bell ringing at a familiar time was cause for concern, a point lucidly illustrated by a November 1690 entry from the diary of Samuel Sewell. The stage for confusion was set when the bell ordinarily rung for Boston's curfew lost its clapper while ringing for a daytime lecture. When the bell of a different meeting house rang at nine o'clock that evening, "many people started, fearing there had been fire."¹³⁶ Unanticipated ringing continued to command public attention well into the nineteenth century. Its significance was sometimes formally written into community regulations, such as those adopted by

Windsor, Connecticut, including East Windsor, South Windsor, and Ellington, Prior to 1768 (New York, 1859), 309. In Boston, churches tolled the day of the month after ringing the morning bell. See Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1825, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 3: 288.

135. Tolling became the favored method for urban fire alarms in the nineteenth century as populations grew and tolling mechanisms became more common. Measured strokes broadcast codes to indicate the general location of a fire. For examples of these codes, see Clarence H. Forrest, *Official History of the Fire Department of the City of Baltimore* (Baltimore, 1898), 188-89; Andrew H. Neilly, "The Violent Volunteers: A History of the Volunteer Fire Department of Philadelphia, 1736-1871" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1959), 37-38; *A Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York; also, of the Ordinances, Resolutions and Orders Established by the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of the City of New York, in Common Council Convened, Relating to the Fire Department of the City of New York, from 1812 to 1855* (New York, 1855), 225.

136. Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729* (Boston, 1878), 1:336.

Needham, Massachusetts. These rules stipulated methods, times, and durations for the use of bells with regard to church services, town meetings, holidays, funerals, and other occasions, but concluded with instructions that “[w]hen the Bell is rung at a time different from what is before mentioned; or when the occasion is not particularly known, it is to be presumed, that it rings on account of fire, in which case it is always to be rung fast.”¹³⁷

The dependable response of inhabitants to unanticipated ringing proved pivotal as relations with Britain deteriorated; in fact, the mere threat that a bell might ring served as an effective deterrent. In September 1766, a rumor that the “Old North Bell was to be set a Ringing as a Signal for the People to Assemble”—a tale born of crowd speculation or possibly the gossip of boys from a nearby grammar school—played an important role in dissuading customs officials from searching a Boston residence for contraband liquor.¹³⁸ Two years later, when commissioners and their families retreated to Castle William in the aftermath of the *Liberty* riot, the refugees were well aware that venturing into town would draw a crowd, and they knew how the crowd would be summoned. One exile described a two-phase alert in a letter to a friend in Liverpool: if a commissioner set foot on shore, “the Sexton of each Church has orders to give Notice by tolling a Bell, when all the Bells are to ring as for Fire to alarm the Inhabitants and raise the Mob to tear em to pieces.” Fear of the violence the bells could summon kept commissioners from their residences for nearly five months.¹³⁹

137. George Kuhn Clarke, “Notes from the Records of the First Parish in Needham,” *Dedham Historical Register* (January, 1893): 30.

138. George G. Wolkins, “Daniel Malcom and Writs of Assistance,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d Ser., 58 (Oct. 1924), 5-96, esp. 31. The bell in question belonged to the Old North Meeting House, pastored by Samuel Mather, not the Old North Church (Christ Church).

139. Anne Hulton, *Letters of a Loyalist Lady* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 11-14, 28, esp. 14.

Bostonians made good on the threat of alarm ringing the night of March 5, 1770. The numerous earwitness accounts among the Boston Massacre trial documents afford a unique opportunity to examine how listeners used supplemental sources of information, knowledge of local conventions, and a familiarity with the soundscape when interpreting and responding to unanticipated ringing. In an account dispatched to his superiors shortly after the incident, Captain Thomas Preston, the British officer in charge, reported hearing alarm bells ring for what he “supposed was for Fire as usual.” News soon arrived that the town’s inhabitants had gathered to attack the troops “and that the Bells were ringing as the Signal for that Purpose, and not for Fire.”¹⁴⁰ Preston’s delayed response contrasts with the immediate sense of urgency recounted by Boston residents during depositions for the trial of the soldiers, conducted in November of the same year. Of the witnesses who were not already out on the streets when trouble began to brew, roughly two-thirds described being first alerted by the town’s bells, and all of these immediately pursued further information. Some had already heard the nine o’clock curfew bell, and these assumed the ringing was for a fire and headed toward the center of town, equipped with buckets and bags. Others strained to hear cries of “fire!” or stepped outside to make inquiries. A number of these quickly learned through word of mouth that the alarm had sounded on account of an altercation between soldiers and inhabitants rather than for a fire. One witness reached this conclusion after observing supposed firefighters outfitted with sticks and clubs rather than buckets and bags.¹⁴¹

140. Thomas Preston, “Case of Captain Thomas Preston of the 29th Regiment,” in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Transactions, 1900-1902*, vol. VII (Boston, 1905), 7.

141. Frederic Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770; Consisting of the Narrative of the Town, and the Trial of the Soldiers* (Albany, 1870), 203.

If the violence had transpired at the edge of town, a crowd might not have collected so efficiently. The customs house was situated within a cluster of church and meeting house bells at the town's center, a vicinity where several fire engines were stored and where responders customarily gravitated for information when the location of a fire was unknown. Many witnesses heard bells ringing at the center of town and followed the sound, assuming that the fire was nearby. Several identified the bells of the Brattle Street Church, the Old South Meeting House, and the "Old Brick" or First Church.¹⁴² The significance of location to a speedy assembly on the night of the Boston Massacre is more apparent if arrangements for a different alarm are considered. Three years later, when local volunteers guarding tea-laden ships at Griffin's Wharf anticipated a need for assistance, a meeting of Boston's inhabitants and those of neighboring communities agreed that if the watch encountered trouble during the day, bells would ring to summon help (the customary alarm for fires), but at night, when responders would need to emerge from their beds to seek intelligence on empty streets, the bells would toll. The signal was distinct—bells had no other reason to toll at night—and responders could proceed directly to the wharf rather than waste precious minutes seeking information, collecting fire engines, or detouring through the town's center.¹⁴³

Even a cursory review of the Boston Massacre trial documents shows that both the prosecution and defense expended considerable effort attempting to establish which

142. Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 56-57, 130, 134, 144, 170, 214.

143. "At a Meeting of the People of Boston, and the neighbouring Towns..." *Boston Gazette*, December 6, 1773. Samuel Adams noted an additional benefit of summoning assistance with bells: the sound of church and meeting house bells did not carry the military connotations of drums or the insurgent undertones of firing the beacon, a signal that would mobilize the countryside. See L. F. S. Upton, "Proceedings of Ye Body Respecting the Tea," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 22, no. 4 (1965), 294.

of the town's bells had sounded the alarm, at what time they had been rung, by whom, and with what intent. Enlisting the participation of a church or meeting house bell in an alarm was not a simple matter of civic-minded hands taking hold of a bell rope in the interest of public safety; rather, in many places it required notifying a sexton or, at night, rousing ringers from their beds. There was no question that the ringing on the night of March 5 had drawn a crowd to the scene of the standoff, but different theories circulated as to how the bells came to sound in the first place. Samuel Quincy, arguing for the prosecution, suggested that soldiers from the twenty-ninth regiment had cried "fire!" in hope that authorized persons would ring the bells, thereby luring unarmed inhabitants into the streets. On behalf of the defense, Josiah Quincy examined one witness who testified to overhearing a group of armed inhabitants plan and execute a similar plan—to cry "fire!" so the bells would ring—and another witness who had seen several boys enter a meeting house through a window.¹⁴⁴

In his closing defense, John Adams reiterated the claim that inhabitants, not soldiers, had caused the bells to sound the alarm. Interestingly, his narrative implicated actors outside the confrontation's immediate context: New Yorkers and newspapers.

There was a little before the 5th of March, much noise in this town, and a pompous account in the newspapers, of a victory obtained by the inhabitants there over the soldiers; which doubtless excited the resentment of the soldiers here, as well as exultations among some sorts of the inhabitants: and the ringing of the

144. Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 169, 184, 197.

bells here, was probably copied from New York, a wretched example in this, and in two other instances at least.¹⁴⁵

The “pompous account” of the Battle of Golden Hill, which circulated in New England papers the second week of February, included the detail that New York’s city hall bell had collected an armed crowd.¹⁴⁶ Adams was not alone in suggesting a causal relationship between the report of the New York skirmish and the events in Boston on March 5; Governor Thomas Hutchinson also observed that the account had “tended to encourage” the discontent of Boston’s inhabitants, ultimately leading to violence. Adams’ speculation went beyond Hutchinson’s general complaint, though, to charge the imitation of specific tactics. It suggested that patriots looked to printed sources not only for ideas that could be reproduced in local street theater, as David Waldstreicher has argued, but also for ideas that might be useful in orchestrating and intervening in more spontaneous performances.¹⁴⁷

Imagining

Previous work addressing the relationship between bells and nationalism has focused on occasions when many bells rang in concert. Alain Corbin, for example,

145. Kidder, *History of the Boston Massacre*, 253.

146. “Extract of a Letter from New-York, Dated, Jan. 22,” *Boston Evening Post*, Feb. 5, 1770; “Extract of a Letter from New-York, Dated, Jan. 22,” *Boston Post Boy*, Feb. 5, 1770; “Boston, Feb. 1,” “Extract of a letter from New York, dated, Jan. 22,” *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, Feb. 9, 1770; “Extract of a Letter from New-York, dated, Jan. 22,” *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 9, 1770; *Providence Gazette*, Jan. 27 to Feb. 3, 1770; “Extract of a Letter from New-York, dated Jan. 22,” *Salem Essex Gazette*, Jan. 30 to Feb. 6, 1770.

147. Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, from 1749 to 1774* (London, 1828), 270; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 17-52.

observed that local celebrations of military victories and annual ringing on the birthdays and coronation days of the king incorporated rural French communities into the nation by causing “hearts and minds to thrill to the rhythms of the wider society.”¹⁴⁸ There is evidence of a similar function in the context of colonial America, where the Declaration of Independence marked a shift in patterns of annual ringing from dates of British national significance to those that signaled a nascent American identity. Even before independence, strategic silences signaled growing discontent. In 1774, when the king’s birthday fell three days after the closing of Boston’s port, Christopher Marshall remarked in his diary that “scarcely, if any, notice was taken” of the day in Philadelphia: “not one of our bells suffered to ring.”¹⁴⁹ With the Revolution underway and an alliance forged with France, Philadelphians celebrated the birthday of Louis XVI and took delight in snubbing King George. In an account that resurfaced in newspapers as far away as Boston and Worcester, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* described the 1779 festivities in detail—from cannon and artillery fire to the “elegant sett of bells in Christ Church steeple,” which were “rung in full peals”—before elaborating the meaning of these festivities for the benefit of the “tyrant of Britain”: “the name of George is detested in America, and Louis honoured as Protector of the Rights of Man.”¹⁵⁰ By the end of the war, bells had ceased to remember the fifth of November, and July 4 was the day most widely and

148. Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* trans. Martin Thom (New York, 1998), 169-73, 264-83, esp. 173.

149. Christopher Marshall, *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall, Kept in Philadelphia and Lancaster During the American Revolution, 1774-1781* (Albany, 1877), 6.

150. “Philadelphia, August 25,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1779; “Philadelphia, August 25,” *Boston Independent Ledger*, Sept. 13, 1779; “Philadelphia, August 28,” *Worcester Massachusetts Spy*, Sept. 23, 1779. The complaints of Elizabeth Drinker—“This being the French kings birth day, we have had a fussy day of it, ringing of Bells, firing of Guns—provide evidence that Louis XVI’s birthday was repeated the following two years.” Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, 1991), 1: 373, 525, 614, esp. 373.

regularly observed with ringing. After the inauguration of George Washington, the honor formerly given to the king's birthday was transferred to the president's.

Ringling on politically significant dates linked British Americans to a new political calendar, but bells also helped to redefine their understandings of community in less conspicuous ways. The sounds produced by bells did not transcend geographic distance; their work was embedded in communication networks and intertwined with other cultural forms. Most importantly, newspapers carried reports of local protests and celebrations throughout the colonies and across the Atlantic. Without the circulation of these printed accounts, awareness of ringing, tolling, and other symbolic gestures likely would not have traveled far beyond immediate audiences. Even so, bells played distinct roles within larger systems to signify fellow feeling between immediate listeners and distant others.

First, bells assembled “the people” and “persons of all ranks” for political action in bodies large enough for newspapers to report.¹⁵¹ Particularly in urban environments, bells were the most efficient way to gather a large showing of inhabitants. A bell's range extended beyond that of the human voice to simultaneously reach a community's remote corners, and it commanded attention and compelled responses even when employed primarily for ceremonial purposes. The Providence tea burning on March 2, 1775, illustrates that the town's tolling bells did more than provide somber staging for the

151. Printed accounts of political demonstrations emphasized popular assent by attributing sentiment and action to vaguely defined collectives, such as “the people” and “persons of all ranks,” in large numbers and from diverse social standings. See Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 30–45; Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008), 407–15. For representative accounts of bells assembling “Persons of all Ranks,” a “great Number of People,” and “the greatest Number of People,” respectively, see “Newport, November 4,” *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 4, 1765, [3]; “Wilmington, in North-Carolina, Nov. 20,” *New-York Mercury*, Jan. 13, 1766, [1]; “New-York, April 25,” *New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury*, Apr. 25, 1774, [3].

proceedings: they compelled inhabitants to make public their political loyalties. When the bells began to toll on the afternoon of March 2, listeners interpreted the sound in conjunction with a recent reminder of the nonconsumption agreement, which had circulated in the *Providence Gazette* the previous Saturday, and an invitation to the event issued by the town crier that very day. The more recent notice had enjoined “All true Friends of their Country, Lovers of Freedom, and Haters of *Shackles* and *Hand-Cuffs*” to “testify their good Disposition” with their participation.¹⁵² In these circumstances, print and town crier provided advance notice, but the sound of tolling bells filled the streets and entered businesses and homes throughout the town at the time of the protest, calling for a response that was immediate and public. Listeners might choose to ignore the summons, but they knew why the bells tolled and understood that a failure to respond spoke as clearly about their political sympathies as compliance did.

Secondly, ringing and tolling served not only to oppose British policies but also to express solidarity with British subjects in other American communities, most frequently Boston. Newspapers carried reports of sympathetic demonstrations back to Boston and throughout the colonies, publicizing the support of one locale for another. Readers in Salem, Massachusetts, could learn that the bells of Newburyport had tolled for two hours during a commemorative funeral procession, led by muffled drums, on the third anniversary of the Boston Massacre, and readers in Newport, Rhode Island, could learn that “the bells of Christ-church were rang, and every class of people testified the most

152. “Mr. Carter,” *Providence Gazette; and Country Journal*, Mar. 4, 1775, [3] (quotations); “To the Inhabitants of the Town of Providence,” *Providence Gazette; and Country Journal*, Feb. 25, 1775, [3].

sincere joy” when news of the Boston tea party reached Philadelphia.¹⁵³ Without print, the inhabitants of Boston (and Salem and Newport) might never have learned of the demonstrations of support in Newburyport and Philadelphia. Yet for persons present when bells rang or tolled—even for listeners who personally rejected the association—the sound represented a connection between their own immediate community and Boston.

Bells could express solidarity between communities because their sound represented a concurrence of sentiment and opinion. They of course did not convey the views of every inhabitant, but their use was nonetheless difficult to construe as the work of disaffected individuals. At one level, ringing and tolling represented the voice of the people, especially the people assembled for a demonstration. The larger the gathering, the easier to promote the sound as representing a consensual voice. At the same time that bells manifested the views of the people—or at least some of the people—they also served as the mouthpiece of organizers, telling the people how they *should* think and feel at a particular moment. Their role was at once descriptive and prescriptive. Finally, bells served as the voice of authority. Because churches and local governments controlled access to bells and regulated their use, ringing or tolling a bell for political demonstrations implied the consent or circumvention of these authorities. Moreover, because bells played a central role in ordering life and regulating activity in urban communities, their sound legitimated proceedings in a way that complementary symbolic gestures did not. Bonfires did not open markets; cannon and artillery fire did not signal

153. “Extract of a Letter from Newbury-Port, March 15,” *Salem Essex Gazette*, March 30 to April 6, 1773; “Extract of a Letter from NewburyPort, March 15,” *Boston Evening Post*, April 5, 1773; “Extract of a letter from Philadelphia, dated Dec. 28, 1773,” *Boston Evening Post*, Jan. 24, 1774; “Extract of a letter from Philadelphia, dated Dec. 28, 1773,” *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 24, 1774; “Philadelphia, January 3,” *Newport Mercury*, Jan. 31, 1774.

curfew; lowered flags did not summon parishioners to church or implore neighbors to extinguish fires.

Although the meaning of ringing or tolling in a given context was difficult to misinterpret, interested parties did occasionally contest *whose* voice the bells had represented. The issue created a stir in Philadelphia in the summer of 1774, after the bells of that community rang muffled to protest the closing of Boston's port. An account appearing in the June 6 *Pennsylvania Packet* described a city in which homes and businesses were shuttered, ships' flags flew at half-mast, and inhabitants' countenances expressed "sorrow, mixed with indignation"—all as the muffled bells of Christ Church rang a "solemn peal."¹⁵⁴ Richard Peters, the church's rector, did not prevent the muffled ringing on June 1, but he responded to the *Packet's* account with a notice in the June 8 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

Whereas in the Pennsylvania Packet [...] it is mentioned, that, on Wednesday last, being the Day when the Act for shutting up the Port of Boston took Effect, the Bells of Christ-Church were muffled and rung a solemn Peal, and that the Houses of Worship were crowded, &c.—We are desired, by the Rector of that Church, to acquaint the Public, that the Bells were not rung with his Knowledge or Approbation, and that, by his express Direction, there was no particular Observance of that Day in either of the Churches under his Care.¹⁵⁵

154. "Wednesday last being the first of June," *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, June 6, 1774.

155. "Philadelphia, June 8," *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 8, 1774. At a subsequent vestry meeting, the church wardens reported being "put under difficulties" due to recent requests for the bells to ring on public occasions. The vestry voted to forbid the sexton from accommodating future requests without the consent of the rector and church wardens. Christ Church Archives, Vestry Minutes, 10 September 1774, 2: 298-99, Christ Church Archives, Philadelphia. The diary of Christopher Marshall corroborates the *Pennsylvania Packet's* report that the bells of Christ Church participated in the protest. Marshall, *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall*, 6.

In clarifying his own role, Peters also called into question the legitimacy of the protest. If the bells had rung muffled without the rector's knowledge or permission, by whose authority and with whose key was the ringing chamber accessed? Whose views had the muffled ringing represented? Peters' response to the *Packet's* account also suggests an awareness of two audiences: immediate listeners and distant readers. He was as (if not more) concerned with the audience beyond earshot.

Printed accounts regularly reported that the bells of a community had rung or tolled for demonstrations, but a claim that all the bells of a community had sounded served as a particularly strong assertion of majority sentiment. One controversial report claimed the participation of every bell in New York in summoning a "Convention of the People" to see off a Captain Lockyer with his unloaded cargo of tea in April 1774. Handbills invited "every Friend to this Country" to attend the departure, promising that the bells would give notice.¹⁵⁶ According to an account published in the *New York Gazette* two days after the event, "all the Bells of the City rang" as planned, and a large gathering witnessed the anxious captain make his exit shortly thereafter.¹⁵⁷ *Rivington's New York Gazetteer*, one of many newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic to reprint the story in the following weeks, also printed a letter from an indignant reader who challenged the veracity of the *Gazette's* "idle paragraphs," especially those implying that the actions of the crowd had represented the consensus of New York's citizenry. In particular, the writer contested the claim that all the bells had rung: "[W]ho says that ALL the *bells* were rung

156. "To the Public. The sense of the city relative to the landing the India Company's tea..." (New York, 1774 [Evans no. 13672]), broadside, 21 April 1774.

157. "New York, April 25," *New York Gazette*, April 25, 1774.

on this *solemn occasion*? when it is *asserted*, that several did not ring *at all*; and that several *others* did not ring but by means of fellows breaking into churches.”¹⁵⁸ A rebuttal, published two weeks later under the pseudonym “Brutus,” insisted that “all the bells of the city, for it is again repeated, sounded the general joy of its inhabitants.” To support this claim, the writer presented a comprehensive inventory of ear witnesses and bell ringers before challenging the skeptic to produce evidence of unauthorized access to churches. Brutus’ self-proclaimed reason for refuting the earlier correspondent’s charges, point by point, was a concern that distant readers—not New Yorkers—might believe that the city’s inhabitants were divided in their commitment to nonimportation. For persons unable to see the crowd’s size or assess for themselves the decorum of its constituents, the list of participating church bells and legitimate custodians served as convincing evidence that the ringing had represented the voice of the “respectable public,” not the voice of a mob.¹⁵⁹

158. “Mr. Rivington,” *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, April 28, 1774. Other newspapers that republished the *New York Gazette*’s April 25, 1774, account include “New York, April 25,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 27, 1774; “New York, April 28,” a *Connecticut Courant*, April 26 to May 3, 1774; “New York, April 28,” *New York Journal*, April 28, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Norwich Packet*, April 28 to May 5, 1774; “New York, April 28,” *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, April 28, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, April 29, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Boston Gazette*, May 2, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Boston Evening Post*, May 2, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Boston Post Boy*, May 2, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, May 2, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Newburyport Essex Journal*, May 4, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Boston News Letter*, May 5, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, May 6, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *London Chronicle*, June 4 to 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *London Evening Post*, June 4 to 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser*, June 4 to 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *London St. James Chronicle*, June 4 to 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *London Daily Advertiser*, June 7, 1774; “New York, April 25,” *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, June 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *London Public Advertiser*, June 7, 1774; “New-York, April 25,” *London Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1774.

159. Brutus, “To the Printer of the New York Gazetteer,” *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer*, May 12, 1774.

Assent and Dissent in the New Republic

After the Revolution, bells continued to assemble the people and invoke the nation. As former colonies ratified the Constitution, one by one, celebratory ringing broadcast the news to local audiences while simultaneously affirming the community's endorsement of the incipient federation, and newspapers conveyed accounts of these demonstrations to readers elsewhere. Late June and early July of 1788 were especially busy, as news from conventions in New Hampshire and Virginia reverberated up and down the coast. New Hampshire's convention voted for ratification on June 21, a Saturday. Boston, Salem, and Portsmouth all received the news on Sunday, but waited until Monday morning to ring their bells.¹⁶⁰ Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale College, noted in his June 25 diary entry that "the Four Bells in the City were set a Ringing" immediately after the news arrived in New Haven.¹⁶¹ News of New Hampshire's ratification reached New York on the same afternoon. As the bells of that city began to ring, Colonel David Henley set out to convey the news to Richmond, where—also on June 25—delegates to Virginia's convention were narrowly voting in favor of ratification.¹⁶² Henley delivered the news to Philadelphia on his way southward (the bells of Christ Church were "immediately set in motion") and learned of the Virginia vote

160. Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 1: 101; "Portsmouth, June 24," *Portsmouth New-Hampshire Spy*, 24 June 1788, [3]; "The Ninth and Essential Pillar!" *Boston Massachusetts Gazette*, 24 June 1788, [3]; "Boston, June 23," *New London Connecticut Gazette*, 27 June 1788, [3]; "New-York, June 27," *New-York Packet*, 27 June 1788, [3]; "Boston, June 23," *Providence Gazette*, 28 June 1788, [2]; "Amendments to the Constitution proposed by the New-Hampshire Convention," *Boston Massachusetts Centinel*, 28 June 1788. 161. Stiles, *Diary of Ezra Stiles*, vol. 3, 320.

162. "New-York, June 25," *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 30 June 1788, [3]; "Extract of a letter from a gentleman at New-York, dated June 26, 1788," "New-York, July 3," *New York Journal*, 3 July 1788, [2]; *Portsmouth New-Hampshire Gazette*, 3 July 1788, [3]; "Extract of a letter from New-York, dated July 2d, 1788, to a gentleman in this town," *Boston Massachusetts Centinel*, 5 July 1788, [3].

before reaching Richmond.¹⁶³ After dining with George Washington in Alexandria, Henley turned back toward New York and arrived early on the morning of July 2. New Yorkers awoke to bell ringing at daybreak, several hours later, and could learn from newspaper accounts that all of Philadelphia's bells had rung from seven until midnight on June 30, after that city had received news of the vote in Virginia.¹⁶⁴ Less than twenty-four hours later, Ezra Stiles watched Levi Pease (who had taken over for Henley) arrive in New Haven, shortly after midnight on July 3. Pease told Stiles that he intended to travel the remaining one-hundred-forty miles to Boston by two o'clock the following afternoon (July 4) "to elevate the Rejoycings at the Annivers^y of Independence."¹⁶⁵ A week later, readers of the *Cumberland Gazette* in Portland, Maine, learned that Pease had indeed arrived in Boston on the afternoon of July 4 (at five o'clock rather than two o'clock) and that Boston's bells had "renewed their peal" after Pease delivered news of Virginia's ratification.¹⁶⁶

For many decades, bell ringing connected listeners to an extended community of fellow Americans annually on July 4 and, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, George Washington's birthday.¹⁶⁷ Into the twentieth century, bells in communities across the nation also rang to celebrate military victories, and they tolled or rang muffled to

163. "Philadelphia, June 27," *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, 27 June 1788, [2].

164. "New-York, July 2," *New York Independent Journal*, 2 July 1788, [3].

165. Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 3: 321. New Haven's bells rang at daybreak on July 3, several hours after Pease delivered his news.

166. "Boston, July 7," *Portland Cumberland Gazette*, 10 July 1788, [3].

167. Some communities rang for the birthdays of Adams and Jefferson, but by Madison's presidency, bells rang on February 22.

mourn the deaths of presidents and other national figures.¹⁶⁸ But political constituencies also rang bells to celebrate partisan victories, and they registered dissent with strategic silence and oppositional tolling. The partisan press obligingly circulated accounts of these demonstrations and, on occasion, instigated the events. On the nineteenth anniversary of Independence, a suggestion that Philadelphia's bells *should* contribute to a political demonstration transformed into news that they *had* tolled in protest. The fabrication began with a mock death notice in the July 4, 1795, issue of Philadelphia's Republican *Independent Gazetteer*, which alerted readers to the upcoming burial of "Mrs. Liberty," who had purportedly expired when the US Senate consented to the controversial Jay Treaty (a measure championed by Federalists). "If there is a spark of patriotism left," the notice hinted, "the bells will be muffled, and the true patriot will bathe her tomb in tears of regret."¹⁶⁹ A crowd did parade an effigy of John Jay through Philadelphia's streets on the evening of July 4, although it is highly unlikely that any bells tolled or rang muffled on the occasion.¹⁷⁰ Nine days later in Salem, however, William Bentley assessed the news from around the nation and recorded in his diary that Philadelphians had burned an effigy of Jay and that the bells of that city had "tolled on the 4 of July instead of ringing."¹⁷¹

As the Republican party gained power, listeners increasingly judged celebratory ringing to be partisan. On the second anniversary of Jefferson's inauguration competing

168. When news coverage of victory celebrations for World Wars I and II is compared, a noticeable drop in celebratory ringing is evident.

169. "Philadelphia, July 4," *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, 4 July 1795, [3].

170. Contemporary diarists did not mention tolling or muffled ringing, and newspapers reported only unmuffled bell ringing on the anniversary of Independence. For more on the protest, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 138-40.

171. Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 2: 146.

accounts circulated regarding Boston's bells: Republican papers reported that bells rang at daybreak, but an account originating in the Federalist *Boston Centinel* claimed that "the day was *not* ushered in by the ringing of bells" and other demonstrations of joy.¹⁷² The following year, in May 1804, New York's bells were drawn into a partisan controversy when Republicans in that city organized a public celebration of the Louisiana Purchase. According to one New York Federalist, the trouble began on Friday, May 11, when the city's Republican papers published a "pompous account" of the planned festivities, which presumed the involvement of numerous social organizations as well as the participation of the city's church bells.¹⁷³ Later the same day, the *New York Evening Post* demanded a clarification: Which bells would be ringing for this "partisan affair"? "[W]e are authorized to say, that neither the bells of Trinity, St. Paul's, St. George's Chapel, St. Marks, New Dutch, Old Dutch, nor of the North Church will ring on this occasion; nor do we believe the bells of the Old Presbyterian Church in Wall-Street, the Brick Meeting House, or of the New Presbyterian Church on Rutgers' grounds will ring."¹⁷⁴ A letter to the editor of the *Spectator*, published on the day of the event, expressed similar outrage at the "impudence" of the Republican organizers.¹⁷⁵ The *Commercial Advertiser* reported

172. "Appropriate Rejoicing!" *Albany Centinel*, 15 March 1803, [2] (quoted from the *Boston Centinel*, emphasis in original).

173. "Extract of a letter from a gentleman in New-York, to his friend in this city, dated May 14, 1804," *Albany Centinel*, 22 May 1804, [3]. For the "pompous account," see "General Plan of Arrangements, for the Celebration of the Acquisition of Louisiana by the United States," *New York American Citizen*, 11 May 1804, [2].

174. "Friday, May 11," *New York Evening Post*, 11 May 1804, [2]. A letter to the editor of the *Spectator*, published the following day, raised similar questions. A Citizen, "Impudence," *New York Spectator*, 12 May 1804, [2].

175. A Citizen, "Impudence," *New York Spectator*, 12 May 1804, [2].

that the organizers had applied to have the church bells rung, only to be rejected “in every instance,” and had eventually resorted to desperate measures.

Early this morning, two men, the *one black*, and the other a little bordering on white, were detected in the North Dutch Church. They had broken into the building and were tugging away at ‘the rope's end’—a very suitable article for the villains had it only been properly managed. The fellows were driven into the street, and the church secured by the Sexton. We are informed, that the bell of the Brick Church was rung in the same clandestine and villainous manner.¹⁷⁶

This account aimed to invalidate any ringing New Yorkers might have heard from the belfries of either church, while simultaneously depicting Republicans and their cause as egregiously outside multiple social norms. With a brief pause on Sunday, the paper war continued the following week. Federalist newspapers picked apart the favorable account of the celebration printed in the Republican *American Citizen*, devoting special attention to editor James Cheetham’s carefully worded assertion that “Bells in the city rang.”¹⁷⁷

William Coleman of the *New York Evening Post* gleefully deconstructed the meaning of Cheetham’s claim: “‘Bells in the city rang,’ says he, (not *the* bells)—Tis true, the Brick-Meeting House, Dutch Church, and Jail bells rang, & perhaps the State Prison bell, which to be sure answers the description.”¹⁷⁸ The accusations and insults continued and were picked up by partisan newspapers outside the region. The following week, the Republican *Salem Register* suggested that Federalist newspapers were perhaps trying too hard to

176. “Democratic Carousal Again,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 12 May 1804, [3] (emphasis in original).

177. “Celebration of the Acquisition of Louisiana,” *New York American Citizen*, 14, May 1804, [2].

178. “Monday, May 14,” *New York Evening Post*, 14 May 1804, [2] (emphasis in original).

discredit the celebration: “Whole paragraphs are spent in telling us that the sextons did not ring the bells.”¹⁷⁹



To a large extent, the episodes of celebratory ringing and solemn (and sometimes oppositional) tolling addressed in this chapter comprise the prevailing understanding of church bells in American memory and history: fabled relics that assumed flashy but fleeting roles in the nation’s political past, such as rousing the Massachusetts countryside to confront British troops on the Lexington green or celebrating the nation’s independence in the summer of 1776. The remaining chapters of this dissertation address practices that informed, motivated, and oriented local communities for less momentous purposes: announcing the deaths of ordinary men, women, and children, and gathering funeral processions; alerting and directing emergency responders; and assembling congregations.

179. “We suspect something handsome must have been done at New-York, at the Celebration of the Cessation of Louisiana...” *Salem Register*, 21 May 1804, [3].

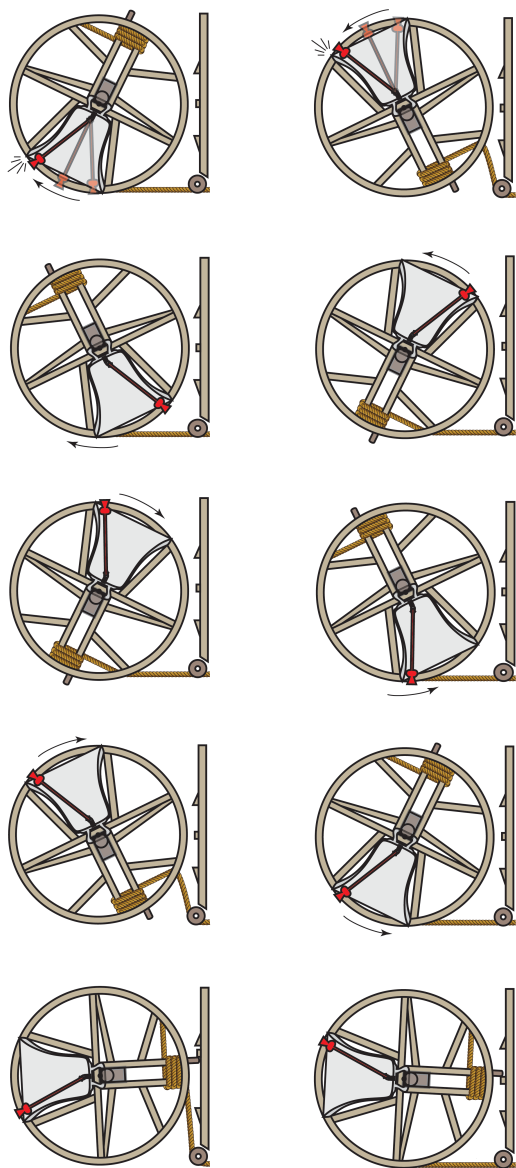


Figure 2.2. Full-circle ringing rotates the bell to strike the clapper. Pulling on the rope moves the bell from an initial upturned position to swing through a full revolution. The clapper moves upward to strike the bell's sound bow in the instant before the revolution is complete, approximately two-thirds of the distance from the bottom of the arc. The clapper continues to rest on the sound bow through the next revolution until the moment of striking. Here the clapper is shown striking the bell's sound bow at an angle of 116 degrees after the bell passes the arc's bottom dead center, as measured by John Richard Norris for a 5-cwt (560-pound) bell. For an in-depth account of how this measurement was taken, see Norris, "When Does a Bell Strike?" October 2010, <http://www.jmorriss.co.uk/strike.html>.

CHAPTER THREE

Calling the Living, Telling the Dead

"I to the church the living call, and to the grave I summon all."

— Inscribed on the bell given by John Hancock to Boston's Brattle Street Church in 1774.¹⁸⁰

Of all the past practices for which Americans employed tower bells, the most difficult to interpret in the present are those related to the death and burial of ordinary men, women, and children. Death knells (sounded to announce that a death had transpired) and funeral bells (sounded while a body was transported to its final resting place) implicated centuries of religious, political, and social tensions. They called attention to relationships between the living and the dead, the saved and the damned, rulers and subjects, and they accentuated differences of class, race, sex, age, and religious sect. The auditory codes for communicating these differences were complex, and they varied from one community to the next; whether a funeral bell tolled at thirty-second intervals for a quarter hour or rang muffled for a half hour depended on the deceased person's demographics and a context-specific configuration of social, political, and mechanical factors. Local variation in the implementation of these practices was the norm, in Europe as well as in America. Alain Corbin, for example, identified

180. Abram English Brown, *John Hancock: His Book* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1898), 177.

considerable diversity across nineteenth-century French villages, noting that “once you stepped outside your own commune the signals would seem scrambled.”¹⁸¹

The complexity and local variability of these practices are further complicated by a scarcity of firsthand accounts. Unlike the fire bell and churchgoing bell (as well as bells for curfews, markets, elections, lectures, political anniversaries, protests, and public celebrations), the death knell and funeral bell sounded in response to biographical milestones in the lives of individuals rather than in response to collective activities and events. This markedly limited the size of the audience inclined to heed and commit to record a given performance. The immediate subject of the tolling—the person for whom the sound was uniquely consequential—was beyond the possibility of listening or writing. For deceased persons of no special political or social prominence, the surviving audience of potential scribes could be small.

Given these challenges to gathering and interpreting evidence, a comprehensive account of these practices across early American communities lies beyond the reach of this chapter. To the extent that surviving traces of performance conventions and listening habits may be salvaged from within particular contexts, however, examining the discontinuance of death knells and funeral tolling is critical to understanding the larger decline of church bell practices in nineteenth-century America. The discontinuance of both practices coincided with a cultural shift, famously described by Philippe Ariès as the advent of “invisible death” in Western societies: the retreat of dying, burial, and

181. Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, translated by Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 166.

mourning from public view, hidden behind hospital walls and concealed by the work of medical and mortuary professionals.¹⁸² But despite obvious similarities, the death knell and funeral bell elicited different responses from audiences: both conveyed information to listeners, but the funeral bell also summoned those listeners to congregate and move through public space. Consequently, the death knell slipped quietly into memory, while the funeral bell faced vocal opposition.

Telling Difference

The death knell and funeral bell originated in pre-Reformation Europe, where the death and burial of a parishioner were communal events to which church bells provided a live and intricately-coded broadcast, from start to finish.¹⁸³ The passing bell sounded as death approached (while parishioners were *in extremis*), and the death knell sounded to announce that a life had expired. The funeral bell tolled while the body was transported from the home to the church and, again, once the procession moved from the church toward the place of burial.¹⁸⁴ Throughout, the sound of consecrated bells served multiple functions: (1) it prompted the dying person to reflect on the condition of his or her soul, (2) it put evil spirits of the air to flight, and (3) it communicated critical information to the mortal audience about the social position of the dying or deceased person in relation

182. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, translated by Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 1981).

183. In addition to the passing bell, death knell, and funeral bell (sounded on tower bells), the ringing of consecrated hand bells accompanied the delivery of the viaticum and, later, the funeral procession. See Percival Price's discussion of the housing bell, lych bells, and spirit bells. Price, *Bells and Man*, 111-113.

184. Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19; Price, *Bells and Man*, 112.

to the community. Variations in pattern, pitch, duration, and method of sounding differentiated the deceased by gender, class, age, marital status, and membership in a religious order, informing listeners how and for whom they should pray.

As addressed in Chapter One, Protestant reformers sought to reduce the duration of death knells and funeral bells as part of a larger campaign against “superstitious” practices.¹⁸⁵ They discounted the apotropaic power of bells, and they objected to bells—or anyone—inviting listeners to pray for the dead. Most parties, however, accepted and even encouraged the passing bell, reasoning that it was good for dying parishioners to reflect on their own mortality and for neighbors to offer prayers on behalf of dying parishioners.¹⁸⁶ The *Book of Advertisements*, published early in Elizabeth’s reign, ordered a bell to be tolled “when any Christian body is in passing,” but limited ringing “after the time of his passing” to “no more but one short peal; and one before the burial, and another short peal after the burial.”¹⁸⁷ The 1604 Canons stipulated the same sequence of tolling (“when any is passing out of this Life”) followed by three short peals rung after

185. As both David Cressy and Peter Marshall have pointed out, church bells were too useful and too much a part of community life for sixteenth-century reformers to eradicate bell practices entirely. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 423; Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, 161.

186. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 422-25. Exceptions to this general concurrence that the passing bell was beneficial include Thomas Becon (who advocated that only one bell should sound to assemble people for funerals) and a preacher known as “Turner of Bullyn,” who in 1563 petitioned the mayor of London to allow no bells for deaths and burials, including when inhabitants “lay at ye marcie of God departynge owt of this present lyffe.” Thomas Becon, *Prayers and Other Pieces of Thomas Becon*, edited by John Ayre (Cambridge: University Press, 1844), 125; James Gairdner and John Stow, *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles: With Historical Memoranda by John Stowe, the Antiquary, and Contemporary Notes of Occurrences Written by Him in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Westminster: The Camden Society, 1880), 125.

187. *Advertisements Partly for the Due Order in the Publick Administration of the Holy Sacraments And Partly for the Apparell of All Persons Ecclesiastical* (London, 1594), 5. The *Advertisements* were initially published in 1566.

the death, before the burial, and after the burial.¹⁸⁸ Bishops advocated the passing bell in their injunctions and, during visitations, inquired how religiously it was practiced in parishes within their jurisdictions. In 1590, a group of Lancashire reformers complained of “manifold popishe Superstition” in their county. Inhabitants indulged in “excessive ringinge for ye dead” on the day of burials, the clergymen reported, “[b]ut while the partie liethe sicke, they will never require to have the Bell knowled, no, not at the pointe of deathe; whereby the people showld be sturred up to prayer in due time.”¹⁸⁹

The general agreement that the passing bell *should* sound while parishioners were *in extremis* makes its disappearance in England all the more mysterious. Sometime during the mid-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, the passing bell ceased to toll while parishioners were dying, and the death knell (which in many places assumed the *passing bell* label) announced departures hours after they transpired rather than immediately. This is a shift that Charles Wheatly noted in the 1720 edition of *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer*, remarking that “[t]he *Passing-Bell* indeed is now generally disus’d, and only the *Short Peal* continu’d, which the Canon orders to be rung after the Party’s death.” The former way of doing things, he continued, “was certainly of much more Use, to give Notice to all within the Sound of it, to put up their last and most affectionate Prayers for their dying Neighbour, and to help their Friend in

188. Mackenzie Edward and Charles Walcott, eds., *The Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England: Referred to Their Original Sources, and Illustrated with Explanatory Notes* (Oxford, 1874), 94.

189. Francis Robert Raines, ed., *A Description of the State, Civil and Ecclesiastical, of the County of Lancaster, about the Year 1590* (Manchester, UK: Chetham Society, 1590), 6-7.

those Extremities, which themselves must assuredly one Day feel.”¹⁹⁰ The transition

Wheatly lamented in retrospect, Thomas Fuller experienced.

Hearing a passing-bell, I prayed that the sick man might have, through Christ, a safe voyage to his long home. Afterwards I understood that the party was dead some hours before; and it seems in some places of London the tolling of the bell is but a preface of course to the ringing it out.

Bells better silent than thus telling lies. What is this but giving a false alarm to men's devotions, to make them to be ready armed with their prayers for the assistance of such who have already fought the good fight, yea, and gotten the conquest? Not to say that men's charity herein may be suspected of superstition in praying for the dead.¹⁹¹

Published during the English Civil War from Exeter (where Fuller took refuge with other Royalists), Fuller’s meditation captures the passing bell’s redefinition from a listener’s perspective. He heard a bell toll, identified it immediately as a signal of a nearby death agony, and responded by praying for the departing soul. The bell apparently rang after tolling (the short peal prescribed by the canon), because only later did Fuller learn that the “passing bell” had compiled the news of dying and death into a delayed report, rather than giving a live account of events as they happened. The bell had “lied,” and he felt deceived. Moreover, the delay had hoodwinked Fuller into praying for the dead. By the

190. Charles Wheatly, *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England*, 3rd ed. (London, 1720), 450 (emphasis in original).

191. Thomas Fuller, *Good Thoughts in Bad Times* (1645; reprint, London: William Pickering, 1830), 104-105.

end of the meditation, however, Fuller had reconciled the miscommunication: “What I freely tendered, God fairly took, according to the integrity of my intention.”¹⁹²

Later writers traced the gradual discontinuance of the *in extremis* passing bell, citing scattered documentation of “live” accounting in the late-seventeenth century (e.g., a fee schedule for tolling the bell for sick—and therefore not-yet-dead—persons) and indications of delayed reporting in the mid-eighteenth century (e.g., an account of the first parishioner “for whom the bell tolled after death”).¹⁹³ *Why* the recommended practice of tolling during death agonies subsided while postmortem ringing persisted is a worthy question, but it is difficult to answer definitively.¹⁹⁴ A “gowne” purchased in 1572 for a rural sexton, who had to “tolle the bell for sicke persons” at all hours and in all weather, suggests a practical reason for delaying the passing bell until the morning after a death, which became customary in many parishes. Death approached whenever it pleased, and tolling a bell whenever a parishioner might be expiring was demanding work that would have become increasingly burdensome as parish populations grew.¹⁹⁵ Although it is unlikely that churches would have altered the practice to accommodate persons in the lowly office of sexton, they may have permitted a delay to avoid hiring additional labor. Another clue that also alludes to population growth is offered by the author of a late-

192. *Ibid.*, 105.

193. John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, vol. 2, part 1 (London, 1795), 250 (quotation); Thomas North, *English Bells and Bell Lore: A Book on Bells* (Leek, England: T. Mark, 1888), 121. See also John Cordy Jeaffreson, *A Book about the Clergy* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1870), 2: 95; George S. Tyack, *A Book about Bells* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1898), 190-95.

194. Notably, David Cressy acknowledges the discontinuance of the *in extremis* passing bell without directly addressing causes. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 422-25. See also Jeaffreson, *Book about the Clergy*, 95; William Henry Sewell, *On Christian Care of the Dying and the Dead: A Few Hints Designed for the Use of Friendly Readers* (Eaton: J. T. Hayes, 1870), 3-5.

195. North, *English Bells and Bell Lore*, 121.

eighteenth-century history of parishes in northern Wales. After reporting that the passing bell is “punctually sounded” in the township of Tre-Lan, the author explains that “idle niceties have in great towns often caused the disuse.”¹⁹⁶ In this instance, it may have been listeners who objected to hearing the passing bell toll whenever death approached. Even if population growth contributed to the passing bell’s decline, the complete puzzle of the passing bell’s transition from a live accounting to a delayed practice remains to be unraveled.

The auditory codes through which listeners (in pre-Reformation Europe and in later, distant contexts) learned the social position of deceased persons were nuanced and complex. For this reason, fiction, with its capacity to weave the commotion of lived experience into a comprehensible story (narrated, when convenient, from a third-person-omniscient perspective), is useful for elucidating how listeners deciphered death knells. The most cohesive point of entry to the topic may well be Dorothy Sayers’ *The Nine Tailors*, an acclaimed whodunnit that vividly depicts the performance and interpretation of death knells in the fictional English parish of Fenchurch St. Paul. The habits of literary interwar Anglicans are, of course, not generalizable to Congregationalists in New England or even (as I will argue) to historical Church of England parishioners in East Anglia. What Sayers’ meticulously researched descriptions of death knells offer is an

196. Thomas Pennant, *The History of the Parishes of Whiteford and Holywell*. (London: B. and J. White, 1796), 99.

accessible introduction to the math, methods, and vocabulary of auditory representation.¹⁹⁷

The first mystery to unravel is the novel's title (itself a reference to the death knell). *The Nine Tailors* alludes to the adage "nine tailors make a man." The saying's origin and meaning—and how it came to be associated with the death knell—were matters of philological debate in late-nineteenth-century magazines. An early exchange began with a speculation by the Reverend W. L. Blackley in the "Word Gossip" column of the *Churchman's Shilling Magazine*. The saying, "nine tailors make a man," Blackley asserted, arose from an "unsuspected grammatical perversion." "*To toll a bell*," he continued, "is an inaccurate way of saying *to tell a knell on a bell*": the strokes traditionally used to indicate the sex and age of deceased persons were "*told* or counted." *Told* evolved to *tolled*, and the *tellers* (the strokes themselves) "[were] corrupted into *tailors*, from their sounding at the end or tail of the knell, and nine of these being given to announce the death of an adult male gave rise to the common saying, 'Nine tailors make a man.'"¹⁹⁸ Several years later, a commentary in the May 1872 issue of *Chambers's Journal* cast doubt on Blackley's "novel and unexpected attempt" to explain the saying's origin, citing lines from a 1682 title, *Grammatical Drollery*, to argue that *tailors* originally referred to sartorial craftsmen rather than teller-strokes.¹⁹⁹

197. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1934). For a discussion of Sayers' research for *The Nine Tailors*, see Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), esp. 53-80.

198. W. L. Blackley, "Word Gossip," *The Churchman's Shilling Magazine and Family Treasury*, March to August 1868, 246-47 (emphasis in original).

199. "Tailors," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art*, 4 May 1872, 286-88 (quotation, 287).

There is a proverb which has been of old,
 And many men have likewise been so bold,
 To the discredit of the taylor's trade,
 Nine taylor's goe to make a man, they said,
 But for their credit I'll unriddle it t' ye:
 A draper once fell into povertie;
 Nine tailors joined their purses together then,
 To set him up, and make him a man agen.²⁰⁰

The theory that "tailors" originally referred to craftsmen is espoused by the present-day *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*.²⁰¹ However and whenever the association of "tailors" with the death knell came about, it was firmly established in print by the turn of the twentieth century.

Why the tailors, in the adage and in the title of Sayers' novel, numbered nine for a man hearkens back to pre-Reformation directives on the passing bell.²⁰² The formula, as explained by the thirteenth-century canonist William Durandus, differentiated departing souls by way of an elaborate theological rationale, which harnessed representation of the deceased person's sex to the biblical creation narrative.

For a woman indeed they ring twice, because she first caused the bitterness of death: for she first alienated mankind from God; wherefore the second day had no

200. Ibid., 287.

201. John Simpson and Jennifer Speake, eds., "Nine tailors make a man," in *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, 5th ed. (Oxford University Press). Accessed 19 December 2013. The earliest reference to nine tailors cited by the ODP is in Nathaniel Ward's satire, *The Simple Cobar of Aggawam* (London, 1647), 27.

202. Percival Price has argued that the death knell (sounded to announce a death) evolved from the passing bell (sounded as death approached), noting that in some locales the death knell was known as "the second passing bell." Price, *Bells and Man*, 112. Characters in *The Nine Tailors* refer to the practice as "the passing bell," and an informal survey of the first-hand accounts I have collected from American and English sources suggests that the post-mortem death knell assumed the *passing bell* label as the practice of sounding a bell *in extremis* declined.

benediction. But for a man they ring three times, because the Trinity was first shown in man. For Adam was first formed from the earth, then the woman from Adam, afterwards was man created from both, and so there is therein a Trinity.²⁰³

In mentioning that the second day had no benediction, Durandus alluded to the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis. According to this narrative, at the end of each day of creation—with the notable exception of the second day, on which the sky bisected the waters below (the sea) from the waters above (the heavens)—the creator looked at his work and saw that it was good. In the absence of this positive assessment of the second day's work, theologians speculated that the division of the waters symbolized a less-than-good departure from a state of unity. For Durandus, ringing twice for the death of a woman referenced the inauspicious divisiveness of the second day of creation, evoking the temptation of Eve and the consequent estrangement of humankind from God. Ringing three times for the death of a man conveniently associated maleness with the Trinity.²⁰⁴ Later explanations of the three-to-two formula maintained the association between three tellers for a man and the Trinity, while linking a woman's two tellers to the Savior (the second person of the Trinity), born of a woman.²⁰⁵

In fictional Fenchurch St. Paul and in the historical East Anglia county of Huntingdonshire, where Sayers experienced the turn of the twentieth century as a rector's daughter, the three-to-two formula prescribed by Durandus was commonly rendered as

203. Durandus, *Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments*, 95-96.

204. See Durandus, *Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments*, 95-96, especially 95n16, in which the translators cite the theological work of Hugh of Saint Victor. The creation narrative referenced is found in Genesis 1, with the account of the second day in verses 6 through 8.

205. See Thomas North, *The Church Bells of Leicestershire* (Leicester, 1876), 105-06; Henry Beauchamp Walters, *Church Bells of England* (Oxford: Henry Frowde, 1912), 156-57.

three sets of three tellers for a man and two sets of three tellers for a woman.²⁰⁶ This pattern is performed and interpreted several times in the *Nine Tailors*' plot as various characters meet their ends. Consider a scene in which the village rector (a character prone to episodes of expository soliloquy) decodes the death knell of a forty-six-year-old male parishioner.

[A] deep, booming sound smote his ear from afar. He stood still with his hand upon the gate.

"That's Tailor Paul," said the Rector to himself. Three solemn notes, and a pause.

"Man or woman?"

Three notes, and then three more.

"Man," said the Rector.²⁰⁷

Here the sex of the deceased is communicated by the third set of three tellers. (For the death of a woman there would have been two sets of three tellers.) The rector's identification of "Tailor Paul" as the bell sounding the death knell is also significant, because Tailor Paul is the name of the tenor (lowest-pitched) of the eight bells in the tower and the bell customarily used in Fenchurch St. Paul for death knells. After learning the departed parishioner's sex, the rector counts the tellers that follow, "hastily reckon[ing] up the weaklings of his flock," sighing with relief as the tally rules out children, and growing distressed as the number approaches forty-six and he realizes that the departed member of his parish is the local squire.²⁰⁸

206. Theodore Montague Nugent Owen, *The Church Bells of Huntingdonshire: Their Inscriptions, Founders, Uses, Traditions, Etc.* (London, 1899), 51.

207. Sayers, *Nine Tailors*, 85.

208. *Ibid.*, 86.

Although the death knells depicted in *The Nine Tailors* are remarkably well-informed, the details of their execution should not be considered the rule for English parishes during or before the 1930s. Inventories of parish customs assembled by Victorian antiquarians suggest that implementation of the practice differed on a number of measures across parishes in southern England when Sayers was a child.²⁰⁹ Some parishes sounded the death knell as soon as a death was reported. Others waited until the following day, in some cases restricting the practice to certain hours. Scattered parishes opted to not indicate the deceased person's age at all, and others represented approximate age by using lighter-weight (and therefore higher-pitched) bells for children and women. Elsewhere, pitch denoted class. In the parish of Louth, for example, use of the fifth bell ("generally rung for the working classes") was included with the standard burial fee for all parishioners, while use of the seventh ("generally rung for the tradespeople") or eighth bell ("chiefly confined to the nobility and gentry") cost additional shillings.²¹⁰ Tellers to indicate sex were almost (although not entirely) universal. Many parishes adhered to the traditional three-to-two formula, with a total of nine tellers for men and six for women,

209. Antiquarian studies of church bell uses and inscriptions were conducted for most parishes in Southern England during the late-nineteenth century. See Alfred Heneage Cocks, *The Church Bells of Buckinghamshire: Their Inscriptions, Founders, and Uses, and Traditions; &c.* (London, 1897); North, *Church Bells of Leicestershire*; Thomas North, *The Church Bells of Northamptonshire* (Leicester, 1878); Thomas North, *The Church Bells of Rutland* (Leicester, 1880); Thomas North, *The Church Bells of the County and City of Lincoln: Their Founders, Inscriptions, Traditions, and Peculiar Uses* (Leicester, UK: Samuel Clarke, 1882); Thomas North, *The Church Bells of Bedfordshire* (London, 1883); Thomas North, *The Church Bells of Hertfordshire* (London, 1886); Theodore Montague Nugent Owen, *The Church Bells of Huntingdonshire: Their Inscriptions, Founders, Uses, Traditions, Etc.* (London, 1899).

210. Thomas North, who acquired the data for his history of Lincolnshire church bells from parish officers, does not directly say that the families of working-class deceased persons could have the seventh bell used by scraping together 3s 6d. His wording suggests that an upgrade of this nature may have been possible, even if it was uncommon. North, *Church Bells of the County and City of Lincoln*, esp. 177.

but even the performance of this straightforward ratio was subject to variation.²¹¹

Sounding two sets of three tellers for the death of a woman was the norm in the parishes of Huntingdonshire, but parishes across southern England more commonly sounded three sets of two tellers.²¹²

Juxtaposing the death knells depicted in Sayers' novel with documentation of the practice across English parishes is possible due to the labor of English antiquarians, who inventoried the bells and performance practices of over twenty counties between 1860 and the first World War. In England, where the canon law of a state church stipulated the passing bell and permitted a short peal "after the party's death, if it so fall out," systematic inquiry was feasible even for researchers who wished to conduct their investigations remotely.²¹³ Thomas North, a retired Leicester banker whose health prevented him from climbing into bell chambers, enlisted clergy from the parishes of six counties to record inscriptions, take rubbings of iconographic markings, and report details of performance practice.²¹⁴ Comparable documentation of the death knell by American antiquarians is meager, and it is qualitatively different from English accounts on an important measure.²¹⁵ Whereas North, in the 1870s and 1880s, reported details of the

211. Although English parishes in the late-nineteenth century generally observed the three-to-two formula prescribed by Durandus, the connotations differed. The association of maleness with the Trinity remained intact, but ringing twice for women was more often explained as "in honour of our Saviour, born of a woman." See North, *Church Bells of Bedfordshire*, 95-96; North, *Church Bells of Rutland*, 91.

212. See Cocks, *Church Bells of Buckinghamshire*; North, *Church Bells of Leicestershire*; North, *Church Bells of Northamptonshire*; North, *Church Bells of Rutland*; North, *Church Bells of Bedfordshire*; North, *Church Bells of Hertfordshire*; Owen, *Church Bells of Huntingdonshire*.

213. *Constitutions and Canons*, 94.

214. North, *Church Bells of Leicestershire*, xii-xiii. See also North, *Church Bells of Northamptonshire*; North, *Church Bells of the County and City of Lincoln*; North, *Church Bells of Rutland*; North, *Church Bells of Bedfordshire*; North, *Church Bells of Hertfordshire*.

215. Unlike North, who was able to call upon a network of Anglican officers and employees in the parishes of every county, American antiquarians had to work across greater geographical distances and had

death knell's *current* implementation in English parishes, surviving late-nineteenth-century accounts of American death knells are almost exclusively retrospective. At a time when English death knells could be catalogued by the methods they employed to render social differences audible, Americans coaxed vestiges of past death knells from aging memories.

The Recollected Record

One such account of the death knell as a remembered practice was written by John Hill Martin (b. 1823), a Philadelphia attorney and member of the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Martin, who spent his summers in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, published a "historical sketch" of the village in 1872.²¹⁶ Traditions of the Moravian Church, whose members had settled the community in 1741, were still evident in Bethlehem during Martin's stays, including the custom of announcing deaths, not with a tolling bell, but with a trombone choir performing three hymns from the church's belfry. (Figure 3.1.) Although the first and third hymns were the same for all congregants,

to negotiate access to the records and practices of multiple religious sects. Consequently, retrospective accounts of the death knell as a routine practice are scattered throughout nineteenth century local histories and memoirs, but American antiquarians who specifically studied bells and bell practices were fewer in number and less prolific than their English counterparts. Elbridge Henry Goss' two-part article in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* and articles published by Arthur H. Nichols on specific bells most closely approximate the work of English antiquarians. Elbridge H. Goss, "Early Bells of Massachusetts," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 28 (1874): 176-84, 279-88; Elbridge H. Goss, "Bells," *New England Magazine* 3, no. 5 (January 1891): 547-69; Arthur H. Nichols, "Christ Church Bells, Boston, Mass." *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 58 (1904), 63-71; Arthur H. Nichols, "The Early Bells of Paul Revere," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 58 (1904), 151-57; Arthur H. Nichols, "The Bells of Harvard College," *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* 20 (1912), 613-24; Arthur H. Nichols "Bells of Trinity Church, Newport, RI," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 70 (1916), 147-50.

216. John Hill Martin, *Historical Sketch of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania: With Some Account of the Moravian Church*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: John L. Pile, 1873).

Martin explained, “the second air is varied, as it designates the sex, and condition in life of the deceased, or in Moravian phraseology, the choir to which the departed belonged.”²¹⁷ From Moravian choirs, Martin turned his attention to comparable uses of church bells by communities farther removed. The current practice in England, he informed readers, was to toll a bell the morning after a death, with subsequent “knells” to differentiate men, women, and children. In former times, he continued (citing the twelfth chapter of an English novel recently serialized in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*), English parishes had rung out the precise age of the deceased.²¹⁸ This was a practice with which Martin had personal experience: “such was the custom in the parish of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church at Chester, Pennsylvania, in my boyhood.”²¹⁹

Martin’s articulation of personal recollection with supplementary facts (and fictions), gathered from sources of unspecified origin, is typical of other retrospective accounts of American death knells scattered through late-nineteenth-century memoirs and local histories. By contextualizing remembered death knells alongside similar customs from earlier times and other places, the authors of these works made sense of a bygone tradition for uninitiated readers and, perhaps, for themselves. Collectively, these retrospective accounts offer unreliable evidence of how Americans performed and decoded death knells when (and if) the practice was common. While some narratives

217. *Ibid.*, 88. In addition to sex, the “choirs” were divided by age (girls and boys, maidens and youths, women and men), and adults were further categorized by marital status (never married, currently married, and formerly married).

218. *Ibid.*, 89. Martin cited a fictional death knell from Chapter 12 of Dinah Maria Craik’s “A Brave Lady,” which *Harper’s* began publishing in its May 1869 issue. The Author of “John Halifax, Gentleman,” “A Brave Lady,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, December 1869, 68-83, esp. 79.

219. Martin, *Historical Sketch of Bethlehem*, 89.

reproduce valuable excerpts from town ordinances and church records, others are sustained largely by nostalgic reverie and boilerplate exposition about the purported uses of bells in all times and places.

The level of detail in certain accounts, though, suggests a firsthand experience with interpreting death knells that is difficult to dismiss. The recollections of one Frederick J. Kingsbury (like John Hill Martin, born in 1823), for example, ring credible in several respects. To begin with, Kingsbury's description of tellers in Waterbury, Connecticut ("three for a girl, five for a boy, seven for a woman, nine for a man") deviates from the "nine tailors" adage, which had circulated widely in periodicals by the end of the nineteenth century.²²⁰ Additionally, Kingsbury noted differences in the pace and method of tolling that distinguished tellers used to represent sex from those used to indicate age. Interestingly, the method for reckoning age (executing the tellers in groupings of ten) would have made it easier for both the sexton and listeners to keep track of the tally.

After ringing a suitable time, which was a matter of judgment on the sexton's part, and determined by the age and social position of the deceased, the ringer ascended to the belfry and, attaching a small rope to the tongue of the bell, tolled the age by pulling the tongue against the side of the bell. The age was tolled in groups of tens, with a rest of a few seconds after each ten strokes.²²¹

220. Katharine Prichard and Joseph Anderson, "Burying Grounds and Tolling Bells," in *The Town and City of Waterbury, Connecticut, from the Aboriginal Period to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five*, edited by Joseph Anderson (New Haven, CT: The Price & Lee Company, 1896), 683.

221. Ibid, 683. Sounding the tellers as described here would have permitted faster teller strokes and required less exertion (minus the effort of climbing higher to reach the bell) than the method of tolling by rotating the bell on its wheel.

Finally, rather than presenting the death knell as a transparent means of communicating somber but simple news, Kingsbury located the practice within larger and more complex processes of perception and interpretation. “If we could not decide, before the bell ceased, who among the persons known to be ill had passed away,” he recalled, “the inference was that a non resident had been brought here to be buried, and the subject was a matter of inquiry. Frequently this was shouted to the sexton from below by some curious person in the pauses of the bell.”²²²

Few retrospective descriptions of death knells are as detailed or convincing as Kingsbury’s. Still, the fact remains that a number of American memoirists and historians addressed the “good old custom” (in varying shades of purple prose) when chronicling both their personal experiences and the past lives of their communities.²²³ If the death knell, at the end of the nineteenth century, was a practice older Americans recalled from their childhoods but seldom heard in the present, it follows that traces of the death knell should be more plentiful in records from the early nineteenth century, when the practice was, presumably, current. Yet this is not the case. Whereas eulogistic reflections on the departed death knell are scattered through late-nineteenth-century memoirs and local

222. Ibid., 683-84.

223. Alfred Sereno Hudson, *The Annals of Sudbury, Wayland, and Maynard, Middlesex County, Massachusetts* (Salem, MA: Higginson Book Company, 1891), 55. For additional examples of remembered death knells, see Dennis Donovan and Jacob Andrews Woodward, *The History of the Town of Lyndeborough, New Hampshire, 1735-1905* (Medford, MA: Tufts College Press, 1906), 313; Edward T. Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury VT: A Review of One Hundred Twenty-Five Years to the Anniversary Pageant 1912* (St. Johnsbury, VT: Cowles Press, 1914), 333; Joseph Nelson Harris, *History of Ludlow, Vermont* (Charlestown, NH: I.H. Harding, A.F. Harding, 1949), 37; Moses W. Mann, “Medford Bells,” *Medford Historical Register* 17(3) (July 1914): 49–67; Jesse Gilman Nichols, “Meeting Houses in South Hadley, Massachusetts,” in *Some Old Time Meeting Houses of the Connecticut Valley*, 73–85 (Chicopee Falls, MA: Rich Print, 1911), 77; Harvey Americus Weller, *Friedens Church at the Little Schuylkill: A History of the Congregation and Community* (Pottsville, PA: Daily Republican Book Rooms, 1898), 62.

histories, documentation of the death knell when it was a “live” practice is remarkably scarce.

Efforts to regulate, or at least specify, the performance of death knells may be found in the early-nineteenth-century records of a few New England towns and churches. The common denominator across cases seems to have been the introduction of a new bell in a rural Congregational parish that had previously made do without, although the move to govern death knells and other practices did not always happen immediately. Members of the Second Ecclesiastical Society of East Windsor, Connecticut, who received their first bell as a donation in October 1809, waited three years before voting on rules for its use.²²⁴ As the only bell in the nearby area, its uses ranged from sounding curfew to summoning inhabitants for church services and lectures. The rules for performing death knells, which were more elaborate than for other practices, specified tellers to indicate the sex and age of deceased persons.

[The bell] shall ring for a death five minutes; for a male above ten years old, it shall strike three times three strokes; for a female over ten years of age, it shall strike three times two strokes; and for a child under ten years of age, three strokes; and then it shall strike the age of the person deceased; and then it shall be tolled fifteen minutes.²²⁵

224. The congregation in question, now known (officially) as the First Congregational Church or (unofficially) the Scantic Church of East Windsor, has, since its organization in the 1750s, been variously identified as the Sixth, Third, Second, and First Ecclesiastical Society of Windsor and its partitions. In 1812, when rules for sounding the bell were established, the church was known as the Second Ecclesiastical Society. For an overview of this congregation and its names through 1846, see Henry R. Stiles, *The History and Genealogies of Ancient Windsor, Connecticut: History* (Hartford, CT: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1891), 590.

225. Azel Stevens Roe, *History of the First Ecclesiastical Society in East Windsor: From Its Formation in 1752, to the Death of Its Second Pastor, Rev. Shubael Bartlett, in 1854* (Hartford, CT: Press of Case, Tiffany and Company, 1857). 41.

That same year, members of the First Parish in Needham, Massachusetts, adopted rules for sounding their bell (the first in town), purchased five months earlier.²²⁶ For church services, lectures, town meetings, funerals, and other occasions, these rules stipulated the method and duration of sounding. Guidelines for the death knell were vague by comparison, directing only that “tolling, the morning after a person has deceased” should “be left to the feelings and wishes of the bereaved family.”²²⁷ A century later, local historian George Kuhn Clarke (b. 1858) recalled counting tellers to learn the age of deceased persons when listening to these discretionary death knells as a child, but the formal regulations did not specify measures for differentiating deceased persons by age or sex.²²⁸

It would be reckless to extrapolate freely from the rules adopted in East Windsor and Needham to the performance of death knells across American communities. Given the dearth of comparable documentation, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that statutory regulation of death knells was not a high priority for municipal governing bodies and local religious groups. To be clear, a scant record of formal oversight by local authorities does not mean that Americans executed death knells arbitrarily or that the practice was necessarily uncommon. Unlike funeral, fire, churchgoing, market, and curfew bells, which local ordinances more often regulated, the death knell did not summon listeners or otherwise motivate collective activity. At most, the announcement

226. George Kuhn Clarke, *History of Needham Massachusetts, 1711-1911* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1912), 204. This bell is still in use.

227. Excerpted from parish records. George Kuhn Clarke, “Notes from the Records of the First Parish in Needham,” *Dedham Historical Register* 4, no. 1 (1893), 30.

228. Clarke, *History of Needham Massachusetts*, 322.

prompted interested members of the audience to confirm the deceased person's identity. Moreover, there was little need to delineate the performance of death knells for reasons of intelligibility. Listeners would not have easily mistaken the slow tolling or muffled ringing of a death knell for a fire alarm. So long as death knells did not coincide with routine ringing events (at noon, for example, or at the usual times of church services), there was little risk of confusing listeners. As an auditory practice that marked the passing of individuals and demanded no immediate action from the community, it was possible for the death knell to persist widely, warranted by tradition and perpetuated locally, while leaving few traces for twenty-first-century historians to interpret.

Personal Inscription

Firsthand accounts of any tower bell practice are challenging to find, but contemporary reports of death knells are particularly elusive. They lie low in the diaries of listeners who lived in close proximity to bell towers, mingling unobtrusively with accounts of funeral bells. In many cases, differentiating reports of death knells from those of funeral bells requires learning the information-gathering and reporting habits of specific diarists and reimagining their geographic, temporal, and social worlds: how they accessed community news, which vocabulary they typically used when describing various bell practices, where they lived and worked in relation to specific belfries, where their schedules (daily, weekly, and annually) took them, and with whom they regularly interacted. The goal, in each case, is to find contextual clues and corroborating evidence

sufficient to establish whether a given entry about a bell tolling for so-and-so falls into the narrow window *after* a death but *before* a burial. More often than not, ambiguous accounts of tolling bells correspond to funeral processions rather than to announcements of a death.

One explanation for the scarcity of firsthand accounts is that death knells seldom sounded. Certain religious sects (notably Quakers) renounced the practice entirely, and some congregations did not have access to a bell. Additionally, there is no evidence that death knells sounded for members of the lowest socioeconomic classes: the contemporary accounts addressed below describe the death knells of persons with higher than average social standing. But sparse contemporary documentation does not necessarily point to infrequent practice. If the death knell persisted apart from written regulation by local authorities, perhaps it also resisted inscription by individual listeners. Alain Corbin, the master of interpreting past practices from sparse traces, has addressed this methodological question at some length, advising historians wishing to study large-scale sensory shifts to consider “the norms which decree what is spoken and what left unspoken. We need, in fact, to be careful not to confuse what is not said with what is not experienced.”²²⁹ To puzzle out the death knell’s sparse documentation by contemporary diarists, we can adapt Corbin’s broad advice to the particular case at hand. Are there reasons why death knells may have gone “unspoken” and, by extension, unrecorded? To put the question a different way, are there obvious junctures, in the journey from a bell

229. Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire, and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, translated by Jean Birrell (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 189.

tower to the pages of a diary, at which the opportunity to commit a death knell to written record might have been routinely waylaid?

In terms of sheer volume, death knells may have been somewhat less detectable than other practices due to the conventional methods of sounding. Unsuppressed ringing, used for most practices in eighteenth-century communities, would have been somewhat louder than either tolling or muffled ringing. The announcement of a death, which usually employed a single bell, would also have been less noticeable than occasions when bells sounded from multiple towers, such as fire alarms and celebrations. Whether (and to what extent) the death knell's comparatively subdued volume impeded its inscription in personal diaries is difficult to gauge. It is worth noting, though, that most surviving firsthand accounts were written by listeners living in close proximity to a bell tower.

A more likely explanation implicates the interval needed to learn whose death the bell had announced. Listeners sometimes knew of a critical illness and anticipated a death knell before it sounded, but even then, confirming the deceased person's identity often required some form of investigation. How these inquiries were made, to whom they were directed, and how quickly they were answered can only be guessed from clues scattered through available accounts (and these, of course, survive as the result of inquiries that received timely responses). Even if the specifics of these inquiries must remain somewhat vague, a pattern of content across existing accounts strongly suggests that the investigations happened: learning whose death the bell had announced was a prerequisite

to recording the event.²³⁰ With the notable exception of smallpox and yellow fever outbreaks (when listeners monitored the frequency of tolling bells to gauge community health), death knells were personal; almost invariably, diarists specified a name when writing about them.²³¹ When investigation was needed to know whose death knell had sounded, a diarist would have to either (1) postpone documenting the death knell or (2) make a preliminary entry and append a name later, once the deceased person's identity was known. It seems probable that some contemporary accounts of death knells were lost to inscription while diarists waited to learn whose passing the bell had announced.

How listeners came to know and record the identity of the deceased can be reconstructed by examining entries from the diary of Martha Ballard, who lived outside what is now Augusta, Maine. On Saturday, in the primary entry for August 18, 1810, Ballard wrote, "the Bell Told for a Death [yesterday] aftern." (Figure 3.2.) In the right-hand margin of the diary, where Ballard regularly summarized the events of each day, she later added: "Death Old mr Crosby."²³² Ballard lived approximately three miles from the nearest bell (at the Augusta court house), and the right-hand marginalia indicate that she

230. By way of comparison, death knells served a function similar to the blank fields printed on early modern forms. The audible notice compelled listeners to fill in a name. Peter Stallybrass, "Printing and the Manuscript Revolution," in *Explorations in Communication and History*, edited by Barbie Zelizer, 110–18 (London: Routledge, 2008).

231. To date, I have found only one instance in which a diarist failed to indicate the deceased person's identity when writing about a specific death knell. On April 11, 1803, Elizabeth Drinker wrote "the Bell has been tolling most of this forenoon, for some one or more who are gone to their long home." Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 3: 1641.

232. Martha Ballard, *The Diary of Martha Ballard, 1785-1812*, edited by Robert R McCausland and Cynthia MacAlman McCausland (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 1992), 818. Ballard's diary was digitized in 2000 by Harvard University's Film Study Center, and the project is now maintained by George Mason University's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Images of Ballard's original handwritten entries (including the entries for 17-19 August 1810) may be viewed at <http://dohistory.org/diary/>.

was “at home” on both Friday (when the bell tolled) and Saturday (when she recorded the death knell in her diary).²³³ News of the death knell and, later, the identity of the deceased, likely came from either “mrs Smith,” who visited on Saturday, or Ballard’s husband, who traveled to see a local doctor the same day.²³⁴ Either way, roughly a day lapsed between Crosby’s death knell sounding and Ballard entering the information in her diary. Had the news been delayed an additional day, it would have arrived after Crosby’s funeral.

There are reasons to suspect that Ballard’s day-long wait to learn that the bell had tolled for Crosby may have been longer than that of the average listener: (1) Crosby’s death knell tolled in the afternoon, which left fewer immediate daylight hours for news to travel than if the bell had tolled in the morning, and (2) Ballard lived outside of town and heard *about* the death knell rather than hearing the knell herself. But perhaps disrupting the inscription of a death knell did not require a lengthy interval. As a midwife, Martha Ballard maintained meticulous records of patient deaths as well as deaths of other persons in Augusta and nearby communities. Between August 1803 (when the town hung its first bell)²³⁵ and the final entry of her diary, Ballard recorded over one-hundred-fifty deaths, but only twice did she mention a bell tolling on these occasions. A similar pattern may be observed in the recording habits of other diarists who referenced death knells: many

233. Ballard, *Diary of Martha Ballard*, 818. For more on the layout of Ballard’s diary and marginalia, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 20-21.

234. Ballard, *Diary of Martha Ballard*, 818.

235. The town’s first bell was purchased in 1802 for the courthouse. It was hung and first sounded in August 1803 after the South Parish raised funding to build a tower. James W. North, *The History of Augusta, from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (Augusta, ME: Clapp and North, 1870), 324.

deaths, but very few death knells. The simplest explanation for the scarcity of contemporary accounts may be that learning the deceased person's identity pre-empted any intent to write about how the news initially broke. Diarists recorded the deaths of friends, acquaintances, and adversaries. The tolling bell was beside the point.

If death knells were usually eclipsed by the news cycle they initiated, accounts that made it into diaries are exceptional. The question to ask, then, is why these particular death knells captured the attention of the listeners who committed them to written record. Before delving into specific diaries, though, it is relevant to point out a conspicuous similarity across available eighteenth-century accounts: every entry to be examined here was written by a religious dissenter about an Anglican death knell. In light of dissenters' earlier denunciations of postmortem ringing, as well as the Church of England's efforts to rehabilitate the passing bell and death knell after the Restoration (topics addressed in Chapter One), it is quite plausible that dissenting listeners in eighteenth-century American communities resented, at some level, the sound of an Anglican bell announcing the death of a parishioner. Recall the unfavorable reaction documented by the Puritan judge, Samuel Sewall, when a passing bell sounded in Boston during the governorship of Edmund Andros (an event also addressed in Chapter One): word that the North Church's bell had tolled "as [Captain Hamilton of the *Kingfisher*] was dying" traveled across town, via word-of-mouth, in time for Sewall (who did not hear the bell himself) to record the event in his diary the same day.²³⁶ But even if Anglican death knells rankled in the ears of

236. Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, vol. 5, Fifth Series, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 178.

dissenters (and if dissenters objected to passing bells and death knells for the same reasons and with similar intensity), the annoyance seldom moved dissenting listeners to write. Sectarian animosity does not explain why diarists living in close proximity to an Anglican bell recorded hundreds of deaths but only a few death knells.

Fifteen years after the North Church's bell tolled for the dying Captain Hamilton, Samuel Sewall took note when the bell of King's Chapel (Boston's first Anglican church, erected in 1688 by Governor Andros directly across the street from Sewall's residence) rang early on the morning of December 16, 1702: "Heard the church Bell Ring for Capt. Crofts. He dyed last night."²³⁷ Possibly, Crofts' death knell caught Sewall's attention simply because the practice was out of the ordinary. Clues in a subsequent diary entry, though, suggest that Sewall's interest had more to do with the decedent than with the death knell. Three days after mentioning the early ringing, Sewall recorded details of the funeral and burial, noting that Crofts (captain of the HMS Gosport, which had arrived six months previously with the unpopular governor Joseph Dudley) was buried in Captain Hamilton's tomb, ending with the observation that "[f]or Debauchery and Irreligion he was one of the vilest Men that has set foot in Boston."²³⁸ Crofts was not merely an Anglican, but an Anglican who had (it was rumored) "refused to have any Minister call'd to pray with him during his Sickness."²³⁹ The interpretation of Sewall's remarks is further complicated by the fact that Crofts died during a smallpox outbreak, and his death knell

237. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 2: 70.

238. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 2: 70. Sewall noted the burial of at least one other Anglican in Hamilton's tomb: a "Mr. Lock" (buried in December 1687) who was rumored to have "kill'd himself with Drink" and was known to have participated in a riot. See Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 198.

239. *Ibid.*, 70.

sounded the morning after Boston's Selectmen had proposed temporary limits on the duration of tolling for funerals.²⁴⁰ The death knell rung on the King's Chapel bell may have captured Sewall's attention because death knells were unusual, because it sounded for an Anglican, because Sewall despised the particular Anglican whose death it announced, or because it intruded on the attention of sick and dying inhabitants at a time when town authorities were trying to subdue audible reminders of mortality.

Accounts of death knells written by Ezra Stiles, minister of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, are likewise complicated. The first death knell in question tolled from approximately 10:05 to 11:15 a.m. on March 16, 1771, to announce the passing of Marmaduke Brown, minister of Trinity Church, who had died at ten o'clock that morning. Stiles, who seldom made favorable observations about the Church of England or its ministers in Newport, summarized Brown by acknowledging his scholarly achievements and conceding that he had "made a tolerable Figure for a [Church of England] Clergyman, (for in [New England] they are generally of very ordinary Talents.)"²⁴¹ Yet in an entry written on the day of the funeral (at which Stiles served as a pallbearer), Stiles' evaluation of Brown took an acerbic turn. George Bisset (Trinity Church's assistant minister), Stiles hinted, had ascribed too high a character to Brown when delivering the funeral sermon. Stiles also expressed tongue-in-cheek amazement at exaggerated reports of attendance at the funeral ("a great Body of people were convened, some said 4000") by calculating the square footage of Trinity Church and concluding that

240. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston, various dates), 11: 29.

241. Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, vol. 1: January 1, 1769-March 13, 1778 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 96.

it “would not contain 1200 souls—I suppose within & without there were about 1000 or 1200 people.”²⁴²

Roughly one year later, Stiles noticed when the bell of Trinity Church tolled for the death of another Church of England minister, this time an Alexander Keith, recently retired from a parish in South Carolina. Stiles mentioned the Reverend Keith’s death knell, however, subsequent to the matter at the forefront of his mind: “No XI o’clock Bell.” This remark should be read in the context of Stiles’ entry for the previous day, which is consumed by a meeting of the Church of England vestry and its potential impact on the town’s bell ringing schedule. After several years of leaving the evening curfew to be rung exclusively—and at the town’s expense—by the bell of Stiles’ own Second Congregational Church, the Church of England vestry (he suspected) were “contriving to resume it,” having voted to ring their bell not only at eleven o’clock in the morning and one o’clock in the afternoon, but also at nine o’clock at night.²⁴³ Stiles did not mind relinquishing the responsibility of curfew to the Anglicans; in fact, he “earnestly wish[ed] they might have it,” because the Congregational bell was so close to his own residence.²⁴⁴ Yet the very next day, the Church of England bell neglected its duty to ring at both eleven

242. Ibid., 96-97.

243. Whether or not a conspiracy was afoot, Stiles was correct in anticipating that the vote of Trinity Church’s vestry to ring their bell for curfew would affect his own church. At a town meeting later the same year, inhabitants decided that since the bell of Trinity Church now rang at 9:00 p.m. each night with no charge to the town, the bell ringer of Stile’s church should also receive no compensation from the town for the service. George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island, 1698-1821* (Newport, RI: George C. Mason, 1890), 155.

244. Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 1: 199.

and one o'clock, tolling instead at thirty minutes past twelve o'clock to mark the passing of a retired minister.²⁴⁵

Like Sewall in Boston and Stiles in Newport, Elizabeth Drinker, a Philadelphia Quaker, wrote about Anglican (by then Episcopalian) bells. This selectivity can be explained, at least in part, by the close proximity of her home to the steeple of Christ Church, with its eight bells that customarily rang muffled on sorrowful occasions. Whether (or to what extent) religious dissension motivated Drinker to write is unclear. Although she seldom expressed disapproval overtly, Drinker did notice and reflect on differences between the practices of Quakers (or "Friends"), whose meeting houses had no bells, and those of other religious groups.²⁴⁶ After interring a family friend (an Episcopalian "friend" as opposed to a Quaker "Friend") in the Christ Church burial ground, for example, Drinker remarked that the large number of Quakers in the procession had made the event "sort of a Friendly Burying; tho the Parson attended and the Bell rang."²⁴⁷ Still, the contrast between Quaker silence and the audible rites of other religious sects does not explain why Drinker wrote about a handful of death knells when she almost certainly heard hundreds. In each case, what seems to have captured her attention was a combination of factors.

Drinker wrote her most critical entry about a death knell on the morning of November 1, 1805, after perceiving a breach of sectarian tradition: "Emanuel Airs Senr.

245. Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 1: 199.

246. As editor Elaine Forman Crane has noted, Drinker's tone throughout the diary is often "noncommittal." Elaine Forman Crane, "Introduction," in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 1: xvii.

247. Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 1: 386.

is dead, the bells ringing muffled for him—a mistake I believe, E. Airs was a Presbyterian.”²⁴⁸ Whether Drinker deemed the muffled ringing an error because Manuel Eyre (“Emanuel Airs”) was Presbyterian or because the bells were Episcopalian is unclear. Presbyterians were one of several dissenting groups that, following the Reformation, acquired a reputation for renouncing death knells and funeral tolling as “superstitious.” But sixteenth-century theological objections did not reliably govern practice at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁴⁹ Records of individual Presbyterian congregations, for example, show that sextons were compensated for tolling the bell at funerals.²⁵⁰ Over the same time, Anglican rectors in both England and the American colonies had themselves acquired a reputation for denying dissenters the use of parish bells for deaths and burials, by either charging exorbitant fees or arguing that the Church’s bells and burial grounds were for parishioners who had been baptized by the Church’s clergy. In one publicized case, an English rector, after allegedly refusing to bury an infant because he had not “touched it with his finger before life had departed,” defended his controversial decision accordingly: “I certainly ordered my clerk not to toll the bell; for upon the same occasions it had never been customary; nor should I suppose the dissenters would wish to have the tinkling of the steeple house bell.”²⁵¹

248. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 3: 1875.

249. “Services at the Burial of the Dead,” *The Covenanter*, May 1859, 257. Some Reformed Presbyterians renounced the use of bells for deaths and burials into the mid-nineteenth century, but the records of individual congregations show that sextons were compensated for tolling the bell at funerals much earlier.

250. See First Presbyterian Church, *History of the First Presbyterian Church, Morristown, N.J.* (Morristown, NJ, 1880), 34; John Hall, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Trenton, N. J.: From the First Settlement of the Town* (New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1859), 379; Edwin Francis Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey* (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1868), 518.

251. John Wight Wickes, *A Letter Addressed to the Right Reverend Spencer, Lord Bishop of Peterborough, in Answer to an Appeal Made to the “Society for Defending the Civil Rights of the*

Although the sextons of Christ Church in Philadelphia kept detailed records of burial expenses for decades, the account books for the years corresponding to Elizabeth Drinker's diary entries have not survived.²⁵² By available indications, though, the bells of Christ Church in Philadelphia likely rang muffled for select non-members by the late eighteenth century. The vestry's 1758 agreement with the bell ringers provided that the bells could be rung on occasions other than those specified in the contract—with approval of the wardens and compensation of thirty shillings (double the amount the ringers received from the Church for ringing on holy days).²⁵³ Several years after the Revolution ended, the vestry authorized a committee to “settle the fees for ringing the bells on private occasions,” and in 1794 the vestry voted that the warden should “permit the Bells to be muffled when ever our fellow citizens shall make application to that effect and paying the customary expenses thereof.”²⁵⁴ Although the precise amount of this customary expense in 1794 is unspecified, by 1815 it was the rough equivalent of 390

Dissenters” Relative to the Important Question of Church Burial by the Established Clergy (Stamford, UK: J. Drakard, 1808), 45. See also Bernard Lord Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 287, 289; Francis Sadler, *The Exactions and Impositions of Parish Fees Discovered: Shewing the Common Fees Demanded for Performing Any Office of the Church, as Christening, Marrying, Burying the Dead* (London, 1738); John Joachim Zubly, “A Warm and Zealous Spirit”: *John H. Zubly and the American Revolution*, edited by Randall M. Miller (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 83-94; “Answers to Correspondents, &c.,” *Congregational Magazine*, June 1825, 336; Z., “A Reply to the Complaint of Certain Persons Respecting the Tolling of Parochial Bells at Dissenter’s Funerals,” *Congregational Magazine*, July 1825, 354-56.

252. No burial account records for Christ Church survive between 1787 and 1822. The Account Wardens Journal for 1795 lists a transaction for “sundries” from Joseph Dolby (head bell ringer of Christ Church for decades and sexton for many years) to the church on September 7, which could include compensation for ringing the bells for William Bradford on August 24, but there is no way to confirm this guess. Journals, 1708-1833, General Account Books, Accounting Wardens Collection, Christ Church Philadelphia Archives, Philadelphia.

253. Christ Church Archives, Vestry Minutes, 3 April 1758, 1: 156, Christ Church Archives, Philadelphia.

254. Christ Church Archives, Vestry Minutes, 7 May 1787 and 28 April 1794, 3: 37, 80, Christ Church Archives, Philadelphia.

present-day USD.²⁵⁵ This is all to say that in Philadelphia by November 1805, having one's death announced by the muffled ringing of Christ Church's bells was as much a privilege—available to the affluent and influential—as a rite tied to the deceased person's religious persuasion. It is conceivable that the Episcopal bells of Christ Church would ring muffled to announce the death of an affluent Presbyterian, and it is likewise conceivable that the denominational dissonance would capture the attention of an adept listener like Elizabeth Drinker. In fact, the bells of Christ Church marked the deaths of non-Anglicans on two other occasions recorded by Drinker: William Bradford (d. August 23, 1795) was a member of the Second Presbyterian Church, and John Fromberger (d. July 27, 1806) was buried at St. Michael's Lutheran Church.²⁵⁶

If Drinker knew that Manuel Eyre was a Presbyterian, she may have also recognized him as a former colonel in the Continental Army, a former member of the Pennsylvania Legislature, or a successful shipbuilder. All of the individuals whose death knells Drinker wrote about were socially and/or politically prominent. William Bradford died in office as the Attorney General of the United States. John Fromberger (who, like Eyre, served in the Continental Army) was a prosperous tobacco seller. Sarah Riche (d. June 28, 1791), the only member of Christ Church whose death knell Drinker recorded, was married to a successful Philadelphia merchant. But Drinker was motivated to write by more than name recognition. Members of the Riche family entered Drinker's diary on

255. Christ Church Archives, Vestry Minutes, 6 December 1815, 3: 239, Christ Church Archives, Philadelphia.

256. W. A. Newman Dorland and Clement Biddle, "The Second Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 1923), 76-77; Second Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the Corporation, 1772-1805, vol. 1, 109. Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

multiple occasions,²⁵⁷ and eighteen years before his death, on a memorable Tuesday afternoon, Bradford had entered her home. Acting under orders of the Continental Congress, who suspected prominent Quakers of harboring dispositions “highly inimical to the cause of America,”²⁵⁸ then-Colonel Bradford had seized documents from Drinker’s parlor and returned, two days later, to arrest her husband. The tenor of Drinker’s entry for September 4, 1777, in which she described how Bradford and others came to her home—“[they] took my Henry...in an illegal, unpremeditated manner”—is a notable departure from her usually reserved tone.²⁵⁹ When Drinker recorded, on the morning of August 24, 1795, that the bells had rung muffled for Bradford and, later in the day, that roughly twenty carriages had passed by in his funeral procession, it seems likely that her interest in the death of the Attorney General was, at some level, personal.²⁶⁰

The Audience Is a Crowd

Like death knells, funeral bells were personal, but they did not elude written record so persistently. Although diarists usually took care to note the name of the person to be buried, the work of confirming an identity did not significantly impede the process of recording. By the time a bell tolled for a funeral procession, news of the death and impending burial had circulated, usually for at least twenty-four hours and sometimes for several days. Consequently, contemporary accounts of funeral bells, although far from

257. See Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 1: 55, 2: 960, 970-71, 1088, 1341, 1404.

258. *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1907), 8: 694. Henry Drinker was one of eighteen Philadelphia Quakers exiled to Lancaster, PA, for eight months during the British occupation of Philadelphia.

259. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 1: 227.

260. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 1: 719.

prevalent, are more plentiful than accounts of death knells, simply because a diarist could write about the tolling and name its subject without putting down her pen to investigate. More importantly, though, the funeral bell was comparatively well-documented because it elicited a different type of response from the community. Whereas the death knell conveyed information to listeners, wherever they might be, the funeral bell summoned a collective body to occupy and move through public space. Funeral processions—like church congregations and fire companies—were crowds, selectively assembled from the larger audience within earshot. Regulating the timing and duration of tolling or muffled ringing was a way for local authorities to regulate the lifespan and movement of these collective bodies.

How authorities regulated tolling to order the lives of funeral processions can be seen in the evolution of Boston's ordinances over the course of the eighteenth century. The selectmen's first vote on the matter, passed in May 1701, established that burials should be public events, directing that "[n]one shall bury the body of any dead person without making the same Publick by causeing a first and second Toll of the bell of one of the Publick meeting houses."²⁶¹ The very next sentence, though, addressed the delicate equilibrium between publicness and social order, a perpetual source of anxiety for officials in Boston and other communities. To ensure that processions did not linger, the law stipulated that the body should be "on motion towards the grave" no more than "One hour from the time of the beginning of the Toll of the second bell."²⁶² The first bell, then,

261. *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 8: 13.

262. *Ibid.*

summoned mourners to the home of the deceased, while the second bell moved the procession from the home toward the place of burial. For Sunday burials (which were generally discouraged and required special permission), the time allotted for transporting the body was further limited: the procession should be moving toward the grave no more than one hour after the *first* bell.²⁶³

While the 1701 ordinance addressed the community at large, subsequent revisions instructed—and sometimes warned—bell ringers directly, a development that reflected the extent to which the law’s efficacy depended on the compliance of persons employed in this menial, but essential, role.²⁶⁴ The selectmen relied on bell ringers to implement the rules accurately, to convey the rules to persons arranging for the bells to toll, and to report violations when they occurred. Early on, the hour between the first and second intervals of tolling proved particularly troublesome to gauge, perhaps due to the scarcity of personal timepieces, or perhaps due to the persuasiveness of participants in slow-moving processions. In June 1706, the selectmen tried to shift the burden of time-keeping from human judgment to technological measurement, ordering bell ringers to upend an hourglass at the beginning of the second bell.²⁶⁵ Warnings and deterrents that persisted in later renditions of the ordinance, however, suggest that the variable “hour” between the

263. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 8: 13. Sunday funerals, as explained in a subsequent act passed by the Massachusetts General Court, “ofttimes occasion[ed] great profanation” of the Lord’s day “by servants and children gathering in the streets, and walking up and down to and from the funerals,” thus creating opportunities for “many disorders and irregularities.” *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay* (Boston, MA: Wright and Potter, Printers to the State, 1874). 2: 456.

264. In addition to sounding the bell for various purposes, ringers in Boston and other communities frequently served as grave diggers and custodians.

265. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 11: 52.

first and second bells continued to present ringers with an opportunity to profitably customize funeral bells on a case-by-case basis. A carefully worded May 1747 directive attempted to forestall all such transactions by levying a fine of twenty shillings on “any Person demanding or Receiving any more than the Selectmen shall allow for twice Tolling said Bell at one Funeral.”²⁶⁶ It is worth noting that, in this instance, the sanctions that restrained bell ringers from demanding and receiving did not extend to persons offering or giving financial incentives.

Public officials in Boston took extra care to harness funeral tolling for crowd control purposes in two types of circumstances. The first was during outbreaks of smallpox and other diseases perceived to be contagious. Authorities limited funeral bells for fear that the audible confirmation of so many deaths within the community would dishearten the sick and alarm the healthy (concerns addressed in a later section of this chapter), but they also limited tolling to curtail interpersonal contact and, by extension, the communication of disease. Eighteenth-century Bostonians were unfamiliar with germ theory, but they recognized smallpox when it arrived in May 1721, and they knew from experience that it spread from sick to healthy persons.²⁶⁷ In September, members of the Massachusetts General Court noted the prevalence of smallpox in Boston and found “the frequent Ringing of Bells at Funerals” to be “very inconvenient, and prejudicial.”²⁶⁸

Reasoning that “if that Contagion should continue and spread, it would probably occasion

266. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 14: 121.

267. See Amalie M. Kass, “Boston’s Historic Smallpox Epidemic,” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 14 (December 2012), 3-4. Sanitation measures ordered by the selectmen, such as garbage removal and street cleaning, suggest a belief in miasmatic transmission of disease.

268. *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1721-1722* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1922), 3: 125.

the death of sundry persons,” they ordered that no bells toll for the funerals of smallpox victims (permitting, of course, exceptions at the selectmen’s discretion).²⁶⁹ The selectmen carried out this charge by reducing the intervals of tolling to two (by this time the regular ordinance permitted a third interval of tolling, one hour after the second), reducing the duration of tolling to six minutes for each interval, and setting aside one late-afternoon hour per day in which processions could convene.²⁷⁰ This pattern of attempting to suppress the communication of disease, by limiting the duration of tolling and the hours in which funeral processions could assemble, continued in Boston through the eighteenth century during smallpox outbreaks and inoculations. During an outbreak in 1764, the selectmen ordered that smallpox victims should be buried in the hour after curfew (between nine and ten at night) with no bells tolled.²⁷¹

Authorities also took special interest in regulating the duration and movement of funeral processions comprised of particular demographics. At the same September 1721 meeting at which Boston’s selectmen, fearing the spread of smallpox, temporarily limited funeral tolling for the general population to two six-minute intervals, they ordered “that there be but one Tolling of a Bell for the funeral of any Indian, Negro or Molatto, & that they be Carried the nearest way to the their Graves.”²⁷² Two years later, at a general

269. *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 3: 125. Diary entries written by Samuel Sewall during this time mention late-afternoon and evening funeral processions. See Samuel Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, vol. 7, Fifth Series, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1882), 292-97.

270. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 13: 87-88.

271. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 11: 29-30, 17: 277, 20: 52; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1905), 1: 393; Christopher Marshall, *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall, Kept in Philadelphia and Lancaster during the American Revolution, 1774-1781* (Albany, NY: Joel Munsell, 1877), 33.

272. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 13: 88.

meeting in May 1723, the town's inhabitants instituted an elaborated version of these regulations as permanent practice, permitting "one Bell only, and that but once tolled."²⁷³

Whereas great numbers of Indians Negros & Molattoes have of late accustomed them Selves to attend the Burial of Indians Negroes & Molattoes, which practise is of Ill tendency and may be of great Inconveniency to the Town if not prevented, for Remedy whereof Ordered that all Indians Negros and molattoes Shal be Buryed half an hour before Sun Set at the Least and at the nearest burying place (where negros are usually buried) from the place they Shal be carried, thro' the most direct Lanes or Streets that lead thereto.²⁷⁴

Like the temporary restrictions imposed during the smallpox outbreak, the permanent ordinance held bell ringers financially responsible for violations, but it also imposed a fine of twenty shillings—twice the amount extracted from wayward bell ringers—on the owner of any deceased slave who ordered a bell to toll in violation of the law.²⁷⁵

Two weeks before tailoring the town's funeral ordinance, the voting inhabitants of Boston had forwarded a series of articles "for the Better Regulating of Indians Negros and Molattos within this Town" to the Massachusetts General Court for approval.²⁷⁶ This broad legislation, which severely constrained the movements, activities, and social interactions of racial minorities, both slave and free, had been in the works since March

273. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 8: 176.

274. *Ibid.*

275. *Ibid.*

276. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 8: 173-75. The Massachusetts General Court considered two versions of these articles, but failed to pass either. *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 5: 18, 36, 43, 48, 114, 121, 138, 145, 258-59, 264, 274, 286, 292.

of the previous year.²⁷⁷ What sensitized Bostonians to the “great Inconveniency” of funeral processions and other gatherings of subjugated groups in the spring of 1723 was a series of destructive fires and a portentous arrest. On April 2, a slave confessed to setting an early morning fire after “being taken up and examin’d.”²⁷⁸ Although the suspect admitted to attempting other fires, authorities feared he had not acted alone, and on April 15 the lieutenant governor of the province issued a proclamation, denouncing “villainous & desperate Negroes, or other dissolute People” for setting the fires, and offering a reward of fifty pounds for information leading to a conviction.²⁷⁹ The original suspect was hanged on July 4, and a second (according to a vaguely-worded notice in the *New-England Courant*) “died at the Prison.”²⁸⁰

Yet suspicions of a larger conspiracy continued to fuel the imaginations of anxious Bostonians. More than a year after the execution, a writer identified as “Your Humble Servant” recounted details of the case in a letter to the editor of the *New-England Courant* before warning of vulnerability to “the same Calamities in the Town by Fire, the like whereof we never felt before.”²⁸¹ To demonstrate the risk of conflagration, Humble

277. The selectmen were ordered to prepare a draft “for the Better Regulating Indians, Negroes & Melattoes” at a town meeting on 11 March 1722. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston.*, 8: 170, 173-75.

278. “Boston, April 8,” *New-England Courant*, 1 April to 8 April 1723, [2]. See also “Boston,” *Boston News-Letter*, 28 March to 4 April, 1723, [1].

279. William Dummer, *By the Honourable William Dummer Esq; Lieutenant Governour & Commander in Chief in & over His Majesty’s Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New-England: A Proclamation*. (Boston, MA: B. Green, 1723), Evans American Imprints, Series 1, no. 39797. Accessed 16 July 2014.

280. “Boston, May 27,” *New-England Courant*, 20 May to 27 May 1723, [2]; “Boston, July 8,” *New-England Courant*, 1 July to 8 July 1723, [2]. A June 16, 1723, letter written by Cotton Mather to Thomas Prince, which alludes to the “Circumstances of the Poor Creature, who is this week day to dy by the Sword of Justice,” may reference the execution of a third suspect. See Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1709-1724* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 686-87 (quotation, 686).

281. Your Humble Servant, “To old Master Janus,” *New-England Courant*, 9 November to 16 November 1724, [1].

Servant marshaled evidence of congregation: at an hour when most inhabitants were sleeping, the town watch had recently “surpriz’d about half a Score Negro Servants of both Sexes, assembled at a free Negroe’s House,” enjoying a “large Bowl of Punch, and other necessary Inducements to Rudeness and Disorder.” The watch had captured and imprisoned some of the party goers, as the law directed, but a sympathetic master had arranged for their quick release. It was this turn of events that most upset Humble Servant. The actions of the sympathetic slave owner (“so much above Law and Justice” himself that he wouldn’t allow his slaves to be “defil’d” by it) endangered the entire community. “Gentlemen’s Negroes,” Humble Servant argued, were “the greatest Plagues of the Town,” and they were apt to “communicate the Infection to their Fellow Servants.” This time the infection was a boldness to commit petty theft (Humble Servant suspected that the brandy for the punch had been pilfered), but if slaves were allowed to congregate behind closed doors, he warned, the consequences could be dire.

Like clandestine parties, funerals were seen as opportunities for subjugated groups to assemble and scheme, uninhibited by surveillance. This apprehension was not unique to Boston in 1723. Decades earlier, the Governor’s Council of Virginia elaborated similar misgivings when prohibiting slave funerals in the wake of an averted insurrection. Allowing slaves to “meet in great Numbers in makeing and holding of Funeralls for Dead Negroes,” the Council reasoned, “gives them the Opportunityes under pretention of such publique meetings to Consult and advise for the Carrying on of their Evill & wicked

purposes & Contrivances.”²⁸² Similar laws in other communities did not ban funerals outright but imposed limitations on the size of processions and the times when burials could take place. A 1731 amendment to New York’s ordinance, for example, restricted processions to twelve slaves and stipulated that burials take place during daylight hours, reasoning that these occasions afforded slaves “great Opportunities of Plotting and Confederating together to do Mischief.”²⁸³ By moving processions speedily through town, during the half hour before sunset, and at the tolling of “one Bell only,” Boston’s ordinance prescribed burials that were marginalized yet monitored. The time of day minimized disruption to business, while residual minutes of daylight and the attention claimed by the tolling bell ensured that the crowd of mourners could not converse without the threat of surveillance.

Accounting

In addition to constraining crowds and conversations, the funeral bell gave an audible accounting of the deceased person’s relationship to the surviving community. In Boston, where municipal law mandated that a bell toll for every burial, the limit of one bell and a single interval of tolling represented the subordinate status of racial minorities and slaves. Elsewhere, performance parameters (including duration, timing, tempo, and

282. *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*, ed. H. R. McIlwaine (Richmond, VA: Virginia State Library, 1925), 1: 86. At this meeting, the council expanded on fears expressed in the 1680 “Act for Preventing Negroes Insurrections,” which also judged burials to be “of dangerous consequence.” *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619*, ed. William Walter Hening (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 2: 481.

283. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776* (New York: City of New York, 1905), 4: 88. For additional references to laws that limited funerals to daylight hours, see Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 196-97.

the number of bells and towers) varied according to class, race, the religious denomination of the deceased person, the presence and influence of an established religion, the availability of bells, and even the dispositions of local clergy. The general rule for making sense of these distinctions is that greater social, political, and economic worth corresponded to performances that placed greater claims on listeners' attention: longer durations, larger bells, multiple bells, and bells sounding from more than one belfry.

Boston's response to the deaths of British monarchs, and later US presidents, contrasted sharply with the solitary interval of tolling permitted subjugated groups. After confirming the death of Queen Caroline in March 1738, Boston officials set aside a day for public mourning and ordered all bells to toll from eight to eleven in the morning and, again, from two to five in the afternoon.²⁸⁴ Similar arrangements were made twenty-three years later when news arrived of the death of King George II.²⁸⁵ The funerals of provincial governors who died in office were usually distinguished with the tolling of all the town's bells, an honor that was extended to governors' wives on more than one occasion.²⁸⁶ The funeral procession of Mary Craven, wife of Governor Edmund Andros, in February 1688, began around four o'clock in the afternoon and stretched through an entire Friday evening. Samuel Sewall, who retired to his home after accompanying the

284. "Boston," *Boston Evening-Post*, 13 March 1738, [1]; "Boston," *Boston Evening-Post*, 27 March 1738, [1].

285. "The following Proclamation was published the same day..." *Boston Evening-Post*, 5 January 1761, [2].

286. For early examples, see Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 202-03; "Boston, on Saturday, the 2d Currant..." *Boston News-Letter*, 4 April 1720; "Boston, March 9," *Philadelphia American Weekly Mercury*, 9 March 1732; "Boston," *Boston Gazette*, 11 October 1736, [4].

procession on its initial journey from Andros' residence to the South Meeting House, heard the bells toll for the final stage, from the meeting house to the burial ground, at nine o'clock.²⁸⁷ In addition to governors, all the bells of a community sometimes tolled for the funerals of prominent ministers. In the exceptional case of George Whitefield, who was buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in October 1770, bells also tolled in nearby Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on the day of the funeral.²⁸⁸ By the mid-eighteenth century, the fact that all of a community's bells had tolled on the day of a public figure's funeral was a standard element of accounts published in local newspapers and reprinted elsewhere.²⁸⁹

After the Revolution, bells acknowledged the deaths of war heroes and federal officials in multi-stage productions that included tolling when the news of a death arrived, tolling during hours designated for public mourning (if news arrived in time, on the day of the funeral), and, in some cases, tolling during a remote (and corpse-less) funeral. The most impressive performance of all unfolded in December 1799, as news traveled of George Washington's death at Mount Vernon. Washington died on the evening of Saturday, December 14. Bells in Alexandria, Virginia, tolled daily from December 15 until his burial the following Wednesday, which was also the day the news

287. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 202-03.

288. "Portsmouth," *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 5 October 1770, [3]; "It is remarkable, that the Day preceding Mr. Whitefield's Death..." *Boston Post-Boy*, 8 October 1770, [2]; "Boston, October 8," *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 October 1770. A letter from Jonathan Parsons, excerpted by Ezra Stiles in his diary, describes how Newburyport bells tolled on the day of Whitefield's funeral. Stiles, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 1: 79-80.

289. For examples, see "Boston, April 11," *New York Gazette*, 18 April 1757, [2]; "Boston, April 11," *New York Mercury*, 18 April 1757, [2]; "Boston, April 11," *Philadelphia Gazette*, 21 April, 1757, [2]; "New York, September 18," *New York Gazette*, 18 September 1769, [2]; "New York, September 14," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 21 September, 1769, [1].

reached Philadelphia. Elizabeth Drinker learned of Washington's death from her husband, who initially heard the rumor on the street from a local doctor, then found the library closed, and finally confirmed the news after the bells began to ring muffled.²⁹⁰ The muffled ringing continued for three days, at the order of Philadelphia's Common Council.²⁹¹ Bells in southern New York and New Jersey began to toll on Friday, December 20, with the New York Common Council ordering all bells to toll from noon until one o'clock for the next four days.²⁹² Bells in Newport, Rhode Island, began to toll on Sunday morning, and bells in northern New York and Connecticut joined in on Monday, December 23.²⁹³ William Bentley, in Salem, Massachusetts, learned of Washington's death that evening and heard the town's bells begin to toll at sunrise the following morning.²⁹⁴ By December 26, when bells in Gloucester, Massachusetts, tolled to announce Washington's death, Philadelphia's bells were again ringing muffled, this time for an elaborate funeral procession.²⁹⁵ Over the next two months, communities from Charleston, South Carolina, to Portland, Maine, continued to toll their bells for staged funerals and public days of mourning, and newspapers continued to publish and reprint

290. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 2: 1247-48.

291. "In consequence of the melancholy information received yesterday..." *Philadelphia Gazette*, 19 December 1799, [3]; Philadelphia, Thursday Evening, Dec. 19, *Philadelphia Constitutional Diary*, 19 December 1799, [3].

292. George Morgan Hills, *History of the Church in Burlington, New Jersey* (Trenton, NJ: William S. Sharp, 1876), 351; "City of New-York," *New York Gazette*, 21 December 1799, [3].

293. "Newport, December 24," *Newport Mercury*, 24 December 1799, [3]; "On receipt of the above melancholy tidings..." *Norwich Courier*, 25 December 1799, [3]; "Albany, Dec. 23," *Cooperstown Otsego Herald*, 26 December 1799, [3].

294. Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 2: 325; "The afflicting sensation produced in this town, by the receipt of the above melancholy tidings..." *Salem Gazette*, 24 December 1799, [3].

295. "Gloucester, Dec. 26, *Salem Gazette*, 31 December 1799, [3]; "Gloucester, Dec. 16, 1799," *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 28 December 1799, [2]; "Thursday, 26th December, 1799," *Philadelphia Gazette*, 26 December 1799, [3]; "From the Philadelphia D. Advertiser," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 30 December 1799, [2].

reports of these ceremonies. The somber pageantry culminated in late February with a final round of tolling to coincide with the annual observance of Washington's birthday.²⁹⁶

The ceremony attending Washington's death set the standard for subsequent episodes of nationwide mourning, although later commemorations never matched its scale or intensity. The cycle of tolling and reporting that announced and then honored the respective deaths of John Adams (in Massachusetts) and Thomas Jefferson (in Virginia), who both died on July 4, 1826, lasted approximately one month. Formulaic newspaper accounts of these funeral "obsequies" (as they were called by contemporaries) depicted elaborate, meticulously orchestrated rites performed by obliging citizens, who were united in both sentiment and purpose. Differing responses to the death of Alexander Hamilton, though, exposed a contentious political reality beneath the decorous facade. Hamilton died on the afternoon of July 12, 1804, after sustaining a gunshot wound the previous morning in a duel with Aaron Burr. "Immediately after his decease," the *New York Gazette* reported, "the bells announced that he was no more."²⁹⁷ In arranging Hamilton's funeral, the New York Common Council suspended a city ordinance, which had, since 1799, prohibited tolling or ringing bells for funeral processions.²⁹⁸ On July 14, all the city's bells were tolled muffled for an hour in the early morning, from ten o'clock

296. "Portland, Monday, February 24th, Day of Mourning," *Portland Eastern Herald*, 24 February 1800, [3]; "Agreeably to the Proclamation of the President of the United States," *Providence Journal, and Town and Country Advertiser*, 26 February 1800, [3]; "New-London, February 26," *Connecticut Gazette*, 26 February 1800, [3]; "Charleston, Thursday, February 27," *Carolina Gazette*, 27 February 1800, [4].

297. Reprinted in the *Evening Post*. "As we presume many of our readers will be desirous of seeing..." *New York Evening Post*, 17 July 1804, [2].

298. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 2: 569. An early regulation, approved in 1789, limited the duration of funeral tolling but did not proscribe it entirely. See *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 1: 445. 478.

through the duration of the funeral, and again from seven to eight in the evening.²⁹⁹ When news of Hamilton's death arrived in Philadelphia, the city's bells tolled muffled for two days, and they rang muffled again, one week later, during a day set aside for commemoration.³⁰⁰

These audible gestures of collective sorrow and respect stalled in New England. In Boston, a notice published in Federalist newspapers invited citizens to "lay aside all party distinction" and plan a "tribute of respect" to Hamilton's memory.³⁰¹ A delegation from this meeting applied to have the city's bells toll during the event, but the selectmen carefully "decline[d] acting on this occasion in any manner which would implicate the Town."³⁰² An editorial published in the anti-Federalist *Independent Chronicle* cited the unsavory circumstances of Hamilton's death as the foremost reason for acknowledging his passing less publicly. By dueling with Burr, Hamilton had fallen victim to "the punctilios of pride," and to "countenance the action, by an uncommon display of funeral obsequies" would be immoral.³⁰³ The commemorative ceremony nonetheless proceeded on July 26, assembled by the tolling of only the King's Chapel bell.³⁰⁴ That same day, the *Independent Chronicle* gleefully reported the selectmen's refusal to toll the city's bells

299. "As we presume many of our readers will be desirous of seeing..." *New York Evening Post*, 17 July 1804, [2]; "New-York, July 16," *New York American Citizen*, 16 July 1804, [2]; "The following are some of the particulars of General Hamilton's funeral..." *Philadelphia United States Gazette*, 17 July 1804, [2].

300. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 3: 1756; "In Memory of General Hamilton," *Philadelphia United States Gazette*, 16 July 1804, [2]; "Tribute of Respect," *New York Evening Post*, 18 July 1804, [2]; "Sunday, July 22d, was observed at Philadelphia as a day of mourning..." *Cooperstown Otsego Herald*, 9 August 1804, [3].

301. "To the Citizens of Boston, who are disposed to pay a tribute of respect..." *Boston Repertory*, 20 July 1804, [3]; "Friday, July 20, 1804," *New England Palladium*, 20 July 1804, [3].

302. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 33: 238.

303. "Moral Reflections," *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 23 July 1804, [2].

304. "Arrangements at the Chapel," *Boston Gazette*, 26 July 1804, [2].

for Hamilton, along with a paraphrased version (“nearly the following words”) of the selectmen’s reply to the organizing committee.³⁰⁵ In this adaptation of events, the “Fathers of the town” had candidly declared that they “[would] not implicate the town, and therefore, [would] not give orders for the bells to toll”—before adding that any selectmen who participated in the event would be doing so as private citizens.³⁰⁶

The ensuing skirmish was partisan and heated. The Federalist *Repertory* railed against the “malicious, lying *Chronicle*” for printing a “palpable falsehood.”³⁰⁷ In response, the anti-Federalist *Democrat* published an open letter to the Chairman of the board of selectmen, requesting a point-by-point confirmation of the original correspondence.³⁰⁸ The Federalist *Columbian Centinel* obtained and published this correspondence, arguing that a comparison of the paraphrase with the original exposed the *Independent Chronicle*’s “illiberality.”³⁰⁹ By early August, regional newspapers had entered the fray, with Joshua Lane, editor of Newburyport’s anti-Federalist *Political Calendar*, engaging John Park of the *Repertory* in an intricate (and acrimonious) analysis of the tone, content, and veracity of the selectmen’s correspondence, the paraphrased version published in the *Independent Chronicle*, and subsequent press coverage.³¹⁰

305. “OFFICIAL NOTICE!” *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 26 July 1804, [3].

306. Ibid.

307. “THE MALICIOUS, LYING CHRONICLE,” *Boston Repertory*, 27 July 1804, [3].

308. A Citizen, “To Charles Bulfinch, Esq.” *Boston Democrat*, 28 July 1804, [3].

309. “To expose the illiberality of the paragraph in the last Chronicle...” *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 28, July 1804, [2].

310. “It is much to the credit of the metropolis of this commonwealth...” *Newburyport Political Calendar*, 6 August, 1804, [3]; “The Repertory avows an opinion that the late duel of Col. Burr and Gen. Hamilton will have a favorable effect on society in a moral point of view...” *Newburyport Political Calendar*, 13 August 1804, [3]; “Mr. Joshua Lane. Editor of a paper printed in Newburyport, called the Political Calendar,” *Boston Repertory*, 17 August 1804, [2]; “Dr. John Park, Editor of the *Repertory*, a newspaper published in Boston” *Newburyport Political Calendar*, 27 August 1804, [3].

Debating the particulars of who had (or had not) misrepresented whose words and/or intent was important, because the tolling or silence of all Boston's bells represented collective sentiment to listeners in Boston and to newspaper readers elsewhere, in a way that related snubs did not. The South Church's vestry had denied use of their building for the event, and the board of Harvard College had declined an invitation, but reports of these rejections failed to arouse comparable indignation.³¹¹

The fact that all the bells of a community, whether ringing in celebration or tolling in sorrow, represented the collective disposition of inhabitants, underscores the political utility of a different funeral, staged thirty-five years earlier, for victims of the Boston Massacre. The account of the event published in the *Boston Gazette* (which traveled through colonial newspapers, surfacing in Savannah's *Georgia Gazette* more than a month after the funeral) reported that all the bells of Boston "were ordered to toll a solemn Peal, as were also those in the neighboring Towns of Charlestown Roxbury, &c."³¹² With "most of the Shops in Town" closed and a "numerous Train of Persons of all Ranks" forming the procession, the people of Boston had conferred funeral honors typically reserved for high-ranking public officials on a rope maker, an apprentice joiner, and two sailors.³¹³ In addition to remarking on the lowly occupations of the deceased,

311. Snubs from the South Church vestry (who had denied use of their building for the event) and the board of Harvard College (who declined an invitation) were noted in the press but did not incite comparable outrage. See "The Vestry of the Old South Church, have, we understand, refused complying with the request of the Committee..." *Boston Democrat*, 25 July 1804, [2]; "Miscellany, Addressed To Lieut. Governor Robbins, Judge Dana, and Dr. Morse," *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 6 August, 1804, [1].

312. "The 29th Regiment have already left us..." *Boston Gazette*, 12 March 1770, [3]; "Boston, March 12," *Savannah Georgia Gazette*, 11 April 1770, [4].

313. *Ibid.*

accompanying coverage emphasized that two of the victims were “Strangers,” and one of these, Crispus Attucks, was “a mullato man.”³¹⁴

The lengthy durations of tolling and muffled ringing that accompanied the funeral processions of public figures cost vastly more than funeral bells for ordinary persons. The estate of Fitz-John Winthrop, governor of Connecticut, who died on November 27, 1707, while visiting Boston for a family wedding, was charged a full pound for “Tolling y^e bell” on the day of his funeral, an amount more than four times the cost of a standard funeral bell sounded by a Church of England sexton in South Carolina or New York at the time.³¹⁵ The hefty bill suggests that the tolling for Winthrop’s funeral was, in some respect, out of the ordinary. A century later, New York’s Common Council paid nine dollars (the rough equivalent of 185 present-day USD) to a “T. Collister” for “ringing bells for Genl. Hamilton’s funeral.”³¹⁶ As addressed above, newspaper accounts of Hamilton’s New York funeral specified that the city’s bells were muffled and *tolled*, but the steeple of Trinity Church (Hamilton’s own congregation and the place where he was buried) had, since August 1797, housed a ring of eight bells, which were hung for change ringing.³¹⁷ Very likely, the eight bells of Trinity Church were muffled and *rung* for

314. “Boston, March 12,” *Boston Gazette*, 12 March 1770, [2].

315. By way of comparison, Trinity Church in New York charged three shillings for this service in 1704, and Church of England sextons in South Carolina collected two shillings and six pence. Morgan Dix, ed., *A History of the Parish of Trinity Church in the City of New York. Part I: To the close of the rectorship of Dr. Inglis, A.D. 1783* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898), 158; *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: A. S. Johnston, 1838), 3: 420.

316. “An Account of Payments,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 3 December 1804, [1].

317. Although Trinity’s bells had notoriously fallen into disrepair by the 1830s, a contemporary account of the bells’ first performance reported that “the ringers exerted their skill,” an indication that change ringing was initially attempted. “On Monday afternoon the new Bells of Trinity church were put in motion for the first time...” *The Diary or Loudon’s Register*, 6 September 1797, [3].

Hamilton's funeral, and Thomas Collister, the church's sexton, received the large sum on behalf of himself and at least seven other ringers.

The price of funeral bells for the less illustrious dead also varied, on a much smaller scale, according to criteria that differed from one community to the next. In St. Anne's parish (Annapolis, Maryland), tolling the bell and digging the grave were initially covered by the same fee, with the price determined by the deceased person's age and (presumably) size: four shillings and six pence for a child, and seven shillings for an adult. The vestry revised these rules in 1719 to charge separately for tolling and grave digging, although the price of both services still corresponded to the size of the grave.³¹⁸ Later in the eighteenth century, the sexton of the Dutch Church in Schenectady, New York, charged three shillings, regardless of age, for ringing the bell three times and tolling once—with the exception of unbaptized children. In such cases, parents could pay two shillings for the bell to ring once or three shillings for an additional period of tolling.³¹⁹ Ringers also received additional compensation for work that exacted extra physical labor. Rules drafted for the sexton of New York's Dutch Church in 1730 outlined two methods of ringing for funerals: "either four times, with pauses between according to custom, or continuously, as may be desired by the friends of the deceased."³²⁰ For the intermittent method (which provided intervals of rest), the sexton

318. "Vestry Proceedings, St. Ann's Parish, Annapolis, MD," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 7, no. 1 (March 1912), 60. For graves shorter than 4'6," the cost was three shillings for the grave, and 1 shilling and six pence for the bell. For graves larger than 4'6," the cost was five shillings for the grave and two shillings for the bell.

319. Jonathan Pearson, *A History of the Schenectady Patent in the Dutch and English Times* (Albany, NY, 1883), 369.

320. *Ecclesiastical Records: State of New York*, vol. 4, ed. Hugh Hastings (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon Company, 1902), 2493.

personally retained two-thirds of the total fee, but for continuous ringing he kept three-fourths of the amount he collected.³²¹

The account book of Aaron Van Nostrand, sexton of Grace Episcopal Church in Jamaica, Long Island, is a particularly rich source of clues about how the complicated economy of funeral tolling worked in practice. Van Nostrand's detailed inventory of charges for burials and related services, recorded between 1773 and 1820, includes entries that range from "half a funeral bell" for a child, priced at two shillings and six pence, to "tolling bell 3 times" for fifteen shillings.³²² Between these extremes are a handful of entries for five-, nine-, twelve-shilling funeral bells, usually for prominent members of the community. Many of the entries indicate that a bell was tolled but specify no price. This may mean that Van Nostrand recorded only the price of funeral bells that, for some reason, differed from standard practice for pew holders. The three persons for whom Van Nostrand performed a fifteen-shilling funeral bell make up a motley political group: the church's rector, Joshua Bloomer (d. June 1790), who was so loyal to the crown that he had closed the church at the beginning of the Revolution rather than alter the liturgy; the child of Charles McNeil (d. December 1794), a British officer who had petitioned the governor of New York to remain in America after the Revolution; and Edward Willett (d. December 1794), the ninety-three-year-old father of Marinus Willett,

321. Ibid.

322. Horatio Oliver Ladd, *The Origin and History of Grace Church, Jamaica, New York* (New York, NY: The Shakespeare Press, 1914), 351, 358.

a Son of Liberty and future mayor of New York City, who had served in the Continental Army.³²³

Small Change with Big Implications

Also scattered through Aaron Van Nostrand's account book are records of funeral bells tolled for members of other congregations (including William Mills, minister of the First Presbyterian Church), as well as payments Van Nostrand received for either tolling the bell of the Presbyterian Church or arranging for the Presbyterian bell to be tolled along with the bell of Grace Episcopal.³²⁴ This degree of cooperation—or at least toleration—between Anglicans and dissenters seems to have been somewhat common, even before the Revolution. In particular circumstances, though, funeral bells galvanized sectarian apprehension and resentment, and small variances blew up into larger controversies. Funeral bells were personal services, rendered for a handful of shillings, but they were nonetheless social actions, and these are, as Clifford Geertz pointed out, “comments on more than themselves.”³²⁵ The same bell that gave an audible accounting of a deceased person's social worth also spoke to larger matters of politics, economics, and religion.

Word of a particularly rancorous dispute in Savannah, Georgia, reached Benjamin Franklin in March 1771, prompting him to seek the intervention of Noble Wimberly

323. Ladd, *Origin and History of Grace Church*, 358, 360; Henry Onderdonk, *Queens County in Olden Times: Being a Supplement to the Several Histories Thereof* (Jamaica, NY: Charles Welling, 1865), 63.

324. Ladd, *Origin and History of Grace Church*, 350, 362-363.

325. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 23.

Jones, then speaker of Georgia's Commons House of Assembly. Writing from London, Franklin referenced an "enclos'd Paper," which a concerned colleague had brought to his attention.³²⁶ London dissenters, Franklin explained, "were for complaining to Government," but perhaps a personal letter to one of the parties involved—a Mr. Frink (the rector of Savannah's Anglican church and also Jones' pastor)—might resolve the situation peaceably.³²⁷ There is no way to definitively know the specific document to which Franklin referred, but the remainder of his letter to Jones, as well as Jones' reply, clearly pertained to a case that had been decided, almost two years previously, before a Savannah Court of Conscience.³²⁸ On behalf of his sexton, the Reverend Samuel Frink had successfully recovered the sum of three shillings and six pence from two Presbyterian defendants—for funeral bells that the Anglican sexton had not tolled. What moved London dissenters to petition Franklin, and Franklin to appeal to Jones, was concern that the Savannah verdict set a dangerous legal precedent, which might lead to the erosion of religious liberties in both England and the American colonies. Dissenters in the northern colonies, Franklin explained in his letter to Jones, had succeeded in passing provisional laws to keep "Rates and Payments" out of the hands of Anglican ministers, and "it would be a Pity to give [Anglicans] a handle" to prevent those laws from being renewed.³²⁹

326. "Benjamin Franklin to Noble Wimberly Jones, 5 March 1771," In *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 18:52–55 (New Haven, CT, 1974). <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-18-02-0030>.

327. Ibid.

328. "Noble Wimberly Jones to Benjamin Franklin, 8 July 1771," in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 18:167–70 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-18-02-0105>.

329. Ibid.

Why the verdict of a Savanna Court of Conscience would worry dissenters in London—and how Frink was able to successfully sue in the first place—is a complicated story that historians and legal scholars have analyzed as a pivotal clash between colonial dissenters and the established Church of England. Although records from the initial May 1769 case do not survive, historians (notably Harold E. Davis in *The Fledgling Province*) have painstakingly pieced together most plot developments from scattered sources: a pamphlet published by Savannah’s Presbyterian minister, a well-traveled newspaper account, personal correspondence of parties involved, and related acts of both houses of the Georgia Assembly.³³⁰ Necessary conditions for the lawsuit shifted into place in March 1758, when the Georgia Assembly established the Church of England within the province.³³¹ What set events in motion was the death of Savannah’s longterm Anglican rector and his subsequent replacement by Frink in January 1767. By all accounts, Frink’s tenure was distinguished by his assertion of the Church of England’s supremacy within the community, as well as his quest to secure additional income for the Church of England’s rector.³³² A candid observation made by historian William Mackenzie, while

330. Davis’ interpretation of the incident is concise yet thorough. Harold E. Davis, *The Fledgling Province: Social and Cultural Life in Colonial Georgia, 1773-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 224-28. See also Marjorie Daniel, “Anglicans and Dissenters in Georgia, 1758-1777,” *Church History* 7, no. 3 (September 1938): 247-62; Cline Edwin Hall, “The Southern Dissenting Clergy and the American Revolution” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1975), 148-49; Joseph Locke, “Compelled to Dissent: The Politicization of Rev. John Joachim Zubly, 1760-1776,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 453-78; Randall M. Miller, “Introduction,” in *A Warm and Zealous Spirit’: John H. Zubly and the American Revolution, a Selection of His Writings*, edited by Randall M. Miller (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 12; Joel A. Nichols, “Religious Liberty in the Thirteenth Colony: Church-State Relations in Colonial and Early National Georgia,” *New York University Law Review* 80, no. 6 (2005): 1693-1772; William E. Pauley, “Tragic Hero: Loyalist John J. Zubly,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1962-1985) 54, no. 1 (1976), 68-69.

331. *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, ed. Allen Daniel Candler (Atlanta, GA: Chas. P. Byrd, 1910), 18: 258-72.

332. Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 224; Locke, “Compelled to Dissent,” 462-63.

transcribing some of Frink's correspondence in the 1840s, encapsulates Frink's disposition toward Dissenting congregations and their ministers: "Mr Frink evidently seemed to regard *Episcopal* Ordination as *essential* and *therefore* viewed all clergymen not of the true Church of England as thieves and robbers."³³³

Frink's strategy for generating additional income harnessed provisions of the 1758 establishment act to ecclesiastical law and longstanding custom in England. Prohibitions against simony (buying and selling spiritual services) dissuaded ministers from directly demanding payment for rites performed for individuals at weddings and burials, but surplice fees—offerings volunteered by parishioners on these occasions—provided a means to a similar end. How "voluntary" these fees were is debatable; clergy could not deny their services to persons unable or unwilling to pay, but they could take measures to recover the fees in court.³³⁴ Surplice fees were a perpetual sore point for both dissenters (who objected to paying Anglican clergy for work that Dissenting ministers performed) and for Anglican clergy, who anticipated the fees as part of their incomes and felt that parishioners of all stripes should be more cognizant of their obligations. "[I]t is a great Hardship upon the *Minister of the Parish*," bemoaned one minister of a parish, "that so many People have a Fancy to be *married* and *buried* out of it, and that in such Cases his *Fees* should be disputed; for, nothing can be more reasonable, than that *he* should be

333. Albert S. Britt and Lillia Mills Hawes, eds., "The Mackenzie Papers," in *The Search for Georgia's Colonial Records*, 18:134–242, Collections of the Georgia Historical Society (Savannah, GA: Georgia Historical Society, 1976), 235–36 (emphasis in original).

334. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: In Four Books, with an Analysis of the Work*, 21st ed., vol. 3, (London: S. Sweet, 1844). 89.

intituled to those *Offerings*.”³³⁵ Technically, the fees belonged to the incumbent of the parish church (who possessed the church’s property), even for services performed at chapels by assistant ministers.³³⁶

Unlike similar laws that established parishes in England, Georgia’s 1758 act did not explicitly entitle parish incumbents to surplice fees for marriages and burials.³³⁷ It did, however, give the incumbent possession of the parish church, including Savannah’s only cemetery, as well as the powers to sue on behalf of the church, pay the sexton, and tax all citizens (whether Anglican or Dissenting) within the parish.³³⁸ When Frink sought to recover fees from dissenters in Savannah, he sued, indirectly, on behalf of his sexton.³³⁹ His goal was not to confiscate the three shillings and six pence from each funeral bell for himself; rather, he wanted to establish a precedent. If the Church of England sexton could collect fees for all funeral bells sounded within the parish, including those tolled by the

335. William Webster, *An Appeal to the Common Sense Common Honesty and Common Piety of the Laity, in Respect to the Payment of Tythe, &c.* (London: John Brotherton, 1744), 34-35 (emphasis in original).

336. In practice, assistant clergy found ways to retain some of the fees. Roger Price, rector of King’s Chapel in Boston (1729-1746), complained to a superior in the spring of 1740 that his assistant minister, Addington Davenport, had appropriated some of these fees through deceptive measures. Davenport had purportedly convinced a number of couples to postpone their weddings until Price was out of town, ministering to outlying areas. Davenport performed the weddings and collected the fees, then refused to share (as per a prior agreement) on a technicality. See Henry Wilder Foote, *Annals of King’s Chapel from the Puritan Age of New England to the Present Day* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1882), 1: 488-89.

337. The act establishing the parish of Bethnal-Green, like many others, specified that incumbents were “intituled to such Surplice Fees.” An Act to make the Hamlet of Bethnal-Green, in the Parish of St. Dunstan, Stepney, in the County of Middlesex, a Separate and Distinct Parish; and for Erecting a Parish-Church therein,” *Private and Local Bills and Acts*, Harper Collection of Private Bills 1695-1814, 21 February 1744, p. 8.

338. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 18: 268.

339. Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 224; Nichols, “Religious Liberty in the Thirteenth Colony,” 1759.

Presbyterian sexton on the bell of the Presbyterian meeting house, the parish incumbent might be entitled to fees for a range of services performed by Dissenting ministers.³⁴⁰

Many of the case's details are known from an account of the court proceedings originally published in the May 10, 1769, issue of Savannah's *Georgia Gazette*.³⁴¹ From the *Gazette*, we learn that the Presbyterians Frink initially sued were Joseph Gibbons, a prominent merchant who had covered the funeral expenses of a poor Presbyterian congregant, and a ship captain who had paid for the funeral expenses of his Presbyterian first mate.³⁴² In both cases, Frink demanded the cost of tolling a funeral bell and of breaking ground for a grave, each service priced at three shillings and six pence. The defendants relinquished the fees for grave digging because the ground had been broken in the town's only cemetery, which—as of 1758—belonged to the parish church, but they balked at paying the second fee. The Presbyterian bell, not the Anglican bell, had tolled for the funerals. As the *Gazette* account explained, “it was thought no man could be entitled to wages that had done no work, so the decision was left to a jury.”³⁴³

But a three-person jury—made up of an Anglican vestryman, the clerk of the Anglican church, and a local tavern keeper—decided, in a two-to-one vote, that the Anglican sexton was, indeed, entitled to the three shillings and six pence, even though he

340. A letter written by Zubly in 1773 indicates that Frink also pursued surplice fees for marriages performed by Dissenting ministers. John Joachim Zubly, “Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 8 (March 1865), 218.

341. The authorship of this commentary has been attributed to both James Johnston, editor of the *Gazette*, and John Joachim Zubly, minister of Savannah's Independent Presbyterian Church. For a summary of this discussion, see Nichols, “Religious Liberty in the Thirteenth Colony,” 1760n409.

342. “A REMARKABLE case having been tried last week before the Court of Conscience...” *Savannah Georgia Gazette*, 10 May 1769, [3]. For more on Gibbons, see Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 225.

343. “REMARKABLE case having been tried...” [3]

had not tolled the bell.³⁴⁴ The presiding magistrate, Joseph Ottolenghe, was also a devout Anglican and a parishioner of Frink. More importantly, eleven years earlier, while representing Savannah in the Georgia House of Commons, Ottolenghe had played a primary role in passing the act to establish the Church of England.³⁴⁵ According to the *Gazette*'s account, Ottolenghe made no effort to mask his partialities before the trial, and at the trial he affirmed that Savannah's Anglican sexton "had a legal right to a fee *for any burial within the parish whether he was desired to attend or no, and though in a private plantation*."³⁴⁶ Ottolenghe further infuriated dissenters by declaring that they "had no right to the use of a bell at all, and that the Rector of the parish was to blame that he had it not pulled down."³⁴⁷ After recounting the proceedings of the trial and the events leading up to it, the *Gazette* commentary questioned the validity of the verdict. How legitimate could the decision of a bigoted judge and handpicked jury be? The amount rewarded was negligible, but the case implicated matters far above the jurisdiction of the "lowest court in the province."³⁴⁸ The commentary also insinuated that the decision would be difficult to enforce, predicting that "many persons will still refuse paying people that do no work for them."³⁴⁹

344. For more on the jury's composition, see Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 225-26.

345. Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 205; Nichols, "Religious Liberty in the Thirteenth Colony," 1713-22; John C. Van Horne, "Joseph Solomon Ottolenghe (ca. 1711-1775): Catechist to the Negroes, Superintendent of the Silk Culture, and Public Servant in Colonial Georgia," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125, no. 5 (1981): 407.

346. "REMARKABLE case having been tried..." [3] (emphasis in original). This meant that the Anglican sexton could collect three shillings and six pence for a burial anywhere in the parish, even on private land.

347. *Ibid.*, [3].

348. "REMARKABLE case having been tried..." [3].

349. *Ibid.*, [3].

Many particulars of what happened after the trial are known from a pamphlet, published by the minister of Savannah's Independent Presbyterian Church. Exasperated by Frink's legal actions against his parishioners and offended by personal slights, John Joachim Zubly excused himself from the obligation "to be at peace with *all* men," reasoning that events unfolding in Savannah could affect dissenters elsewhere.³⁵⁰ Zubly gathered incriminating evidence, including excerpts of his own correspondence with Frink, appended these to a scathing open letter, and sent the document to a printer sometime in mid-April 1770. What seems to have initiated this chain of events was a directive Frink allegedly issued in January 1770, which Zubly learned of from the Presbyterian sexton, who relayed a message *he* had received from one of Frink's subordinates. Zubly demanded an explanation on January 10.

Reverend Sir,

My sexton informs me that *Battoon*, brought him a message as from you not to ring our bell in case of any death without giving you previous information; if you think, Sir, you have any authority over our bell or sexton, I will take it kind in you if you will let me know by a few lines on what that authority is grounded. Unless I receive a written answer from you signifying the contrary, I shall consider the

350. John Joachim Zubly, *A Letter to the Reverend Samuel Frink, A.M. Rector of Christ-Church Parish in Georgia, Relating to Some Fees Demanded of Some of His Dissenting Parishioners* (Savannah, GA, 1770), 1 (emphasis in original). Early American Imprints, First Series, No. 42204, Evans Digital Edition. The full text of Zubly's pamphlet may also be found in Randall M. Miller, ed., "*A Warm and Zealous Spirit*": *John H. Zubly and the American Revolution, a Selection of His Writings* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 85-94. According to Zubly, Frink refused to walk with Dissenting ministers in funeral processions and had even refused to attend the funeral of Zubly's child, leaving Zubly to officiate. See *Letter to the Reverend Samuel Frink*, 5; Zubly, "Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773," 216; See also Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 77; Nichols, "Religious Liberty in the Thirteenth Colony," 1764n423.

whole matter as a piece of impertinence of *Battoon*, (of which indeed I think him very capable) and treat it accordingly.³⁵¹

Frink replied to Zubly's inquiry the same day, claiming no knowledge of any message Battoon³⁵² may or may not have delivered.

Mr. *Frink*'s compliments wait on Mr. *Zubly*; he is sure that he never gave any direction to *Battoon* with regard to what is mentioned *per* letter. Mr. *Frink* is sorry to find so many in his parish busy in breeding differences, which is contrary to his nature and inclinations. He wishes Mr. *Zubly* and his family well.³⁵³

The content and tone of Zubly's response, sent the following day, suggests that he acquired additional intelligence while waiting to hear from Frink. After parroting back Frink's compliments, Zubly asked if Frink planned to discipline Battoon, now that Frink knew who had been "breeding differences." And had Battoon spread lies in Frink's name to the courts as well as to the Presbyterian sexton? "Perhaps an execution now said to be issued about the very thing in question is also issued without Mr. *Frink*'s knowledge, and contrary to his inclination."³⁵⁴ To these accusations, Frink insisted that he was "not perfectly acquainted with what Mr. *Zubly* drives at in the literary way" and suggested a personal conversation the following Sunday morning. He failed to appear for the scheduled meeting.³⁵⁵

351. Zubly, *Letter to the Reverend Samuel Frink*, 4 (italics in original). Based on Zubly's choice of words ("not to ring our bell in case of any death"), it is possible that Frink had designs on the death knell as well as the funeral bell.

352. Battoon may have been the Church of England sexton, but it is not possible to definitively connect his name with the office.

353. Ibid., 5 (emphasis in original).

354. Ibid., 5 (italics in original).

355. Ibid., 5 (italics in original).

Seeing that Frink intended to persist with collecting fees for labor performed by the Presbyterian sexton, the Presbyterians decided to push back by pulling the Georgia Assembly into the fray. Two weeks after Zubly's last correspondence with Frink, the Commons House received a petition, requesting that a public lot be allocated to Protestant dissenters (anyone subscribing to the Westminster Confession of Faith) for a meeting house with "a proper place for burying their Dead."³⁵⁶ The controversial part of the petition was not the meeting house but the attached cemetery, which would have provided dissenters with an alternative to the burial ground and services of the Church of England.³⁵⁷ The House of Commons ordered a bill based on the petition and, after adding several amendments, sent the bill to the Upper House of the Assembly on March 13.³⁵⁸ The Upper House, less sympathetic to dissenters, allowed the bill two readings, rerouted it to the attorney general for an opinion on its legality, and eventually postponed it indefinitely by scheduling it to be sent to committee during the Assembly's upcoming recess for the King's birthday.³⁵⁹ While considering the bill, the Upper House read memorials and heard testimony from both Frink and Zubly. If Frink's intent was not already evident, it became so with his memorial to the Upper House. Passing the Commons House's bill, he insisted, would establish a dangerous precedent and constitute

356. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 15: 96.

357. Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 227. See Davis' interpretation of this petition and related legislation. Corresponding minutes from the Journals of the Georgia Assembly may be accessed in volumes 15 and 17 of the *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*. For minutes of the Commons House, see 15: 95-96, 100, 105-06, 115, 133, 137, 142, 151, 178-181. For minutes of the Upper House, see 17: 550, 560-63, 566-67, 569-71.

358. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 15: 151.

359. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 17: 550, 554-55, 560-63 (quotation, 555). See Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 227.

an “Attack upon the Priviledges of the established Church.” Besides, he continued, “[t]he surplice Fees in this Province were so trifling as to be scarce worth Notice, yet small as they were, if the Memorialist had a Right to, he certainly ought not to be deprived of them.”³⁶⁰

Frink apparently interpreted the Upper House’s actions as an endorsement. A mere two days after the Upper House stalled the bill for a Presbyterian burial ground, Zubly again wrote to Frink, this time on behalf of “the Widow H.,” who had been summoned to pay a fee for the Church of England bell *not* tolling for her late husband’s funeral.³⁶¹ “I was really in hopes no such demand would ever be made any more,” Zubly fumed. “[T]he fee in question is nowhere demanded neither in *Britain* nor *America*, but only in *Christ-Church* parish, *Georgia*.”³⁶² Frink responded by deflecting blame to the Anglican sexton (who, Frink argued, had “a right to take care of what belong[ed] to himself”) and stating his expectation “to hear no more on the subject from Mr. *Zubly*.”³⁶³ The very next day, a bill was presented in the Assembly’s Upper House to “amend and explain” the 1758 act for establishing the Church of England, including a clause addressing rates for “Parochial Services So far as relates to the Cemetry or burial Ground for the Parish of Christ Church.”³⁶⁴ Although the journals of the Upper House do not specify the bill’s provisions, Zubly reported in a letter, written in the summer of 1773, that the bill would have levied a fee of three shillings and six pence on all burials, with a

360. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 17: 561.

361. Zubly, *Letter to the Reverend Samuel Frink*, 6.

362. *Ibid.*, 5.

363. *Ibid.*, 6 (italics in origina).

364. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 17: 567.

discount of one shilling if the Anglican rector did not attend.³⁶⁵ The Upper House passed this bill and forwarded it to the Commons House, whose members stalled it—by scheduling it for consideration during the upcoming recess for the King’s birthday.³⁶⁶

Judging by the content of his “Letter to the Reverend Samuel Frink,” Zubly prepared the pamphlet at about the same time that the Commons House waylaid the Upper House’s bill to “amend and explain” the 1758 establishment act. Quite likely, Zubly’s pamphlet was the “enclos’d paper” brought to Benjamin Franklin’s attention by London dissenters in the spring of 1771. Letters written to Franklin in July 1771 by both Zubly and Noble Wimberly Jones (to whom Franklin had addressed his initial request for personal intervention with Frink) indicate that the issue remained a source of anxiety for dissenters in Savannah at that time.³⁶⁷ Jones (who was embroiled in his own political turmoil)³⁶⁸ hesitated to approach Frink about the situation personally, and he worried that the Assembly might resurrect the abandoned plan to make Presbyterians pay for the Anglican rector’s nonattendance at funerals.³⁶⁹ Less than two years later, though, the matter seems to have been put to rest. In the spring of 1773, Zubly recounted the episode

365. Zubly, “Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773,” 217. Marjorie Daniel names Ezra Stiles as the recipient of this letter. This is possible, but documentation provided with the letter when it was published by the Massachusetts Historical Society does not identify Stiles as the recipient. See Daniel, “Anglicans and Dissenters in Georgia,” 256.

366. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 17: 571, 581; Zubly, “Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773,” 217. See Davis, *Fledgling Province*, 227.

367. “Noble Wimberly Jones to Benjamin Franklin, 8 July 1771,” in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 18:167–70 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-18-02-0105>; “John J. Zubly to Benjamin Franklin, 9 July 1771,” in *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by William B. Willcox, 18:170–72 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-18-02-0106>.

368. Governor James Wright had dissolved the Commons House of the Georgia Assembly in April 1771, after its members persisted in electing Jones as speaker. See Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 17: 644–50.

369. “Noble Wimberly Jones to Benjamin Franklin, 8 July 1771.”

vividly, but as an incident belonging to the past rather than as a threat in the present, remarking that despite previous troubles, “sometimes both church & meeting Bells toll upon the same occasion.”³⁷⁰ The simplest explanation for the dispute’s sudden disintegration is that the flames of controversy died once no one cared to fan them. Samuel Frink passed away in October 1771, following a short illness,³⁷¹ and afterwards the Anglican sexton lacked either the daring or the encouragement to seek compensation from dissenters for services he did not personally perform. With no one pursuing legal action, the Court of Conscience issued neither opinions nor verdicts, and neither house of the Georgia Assembly revisited the issue of burial grounds. Dissenters returned to burying their dead, Zubly reported, in the “same Ground unmolested.”³⁷²

The fact that funeral bells were personal services, performed in response to the deaths of ordinary individuals, or that (as Samuel Frink insisted) their cost was “trifling” does not mean that the practice itself was inconsequential. Three shillings and six pence, claimed by the greedy rector of a colonial backwater for funeral bells the Anglican sexton did not sound, could draw in both houses of the Georgia Assembly and generate transatlantic concern because the incident spoke to larger issues: the religious liberties of Protestant dissenters throughout the American colonies and the rest of the British empire. If the established Church of England could reach through eternity to pilfer change from the pockets of departed Presbyterians, what did phrases like “liberty of conscience” and “free exercise of religion” (both written into Georgia’s charter) mean for dissenters in

370. Zubly, “Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773,” 216.

371. Zubly, *Journal of the Reverend John Joachim Zubly*, 15.

372. Zubly, “Letter of Rev. John J. Zubly, of Savannah, Ga., Received 11 July 1773,” 217.

British America and elsewhere? Twelve years later—and with dramatically different relationships between Anglicans and dissenters, Great Britain and the American colonies—Americans were thinking about the funeral bell differently.

The Power of Melancholy Thinking

Even in the seventeenth century, American communities reduced the duration of funeral bells during outbreaks of smallpox and yellow fever.³⁷³ One reason was to reduce interpersonal contact, thereby mitigating the part played by people in communicating disease.³⁷⁴ Another reason was to protect vulnerable audiences from harmful—even deadly—media effects. How inhabitants conceived these effects to operate can be gathered from letters published in Philadelphia newspapers during the devastating 1793 yellow fever epidemic. On August 26, the same day the Philadelphia College of Physicians recommended putting “a stop to the tolling of the bells”³⁷⁵ as one of eleven tactics to halt the disease’s spread, the *Federal Gazette* published a letter from a citizen, identified only as “A. B.,” who called for the same measure using stronger language.

373. During a smallpox outbreak in 1677, selectmen in Charlestown, Massachusetts, ordered that the bell toll no more than three times per day for funerals. Charleston, South Carolina, banned funeral bells entirely for an outbreak of yellow fever in 1732. Edward Nathaniel Bancroft *An Essay on the Disease Called Yellow Fever: With Observations Concerning Febrile Contagion, Typhus Fever, Dysentery, and the Plague* (Baltimore, MD: Cushing and Jewett, 1821), 245; William Ives Budington, *The History of the First Church, Charlestown* (Boston: Charles Tappan, 1845), 76n1; S. B. Woodward, “The Story of Smallpox in Massachusetts,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 206, no. 23 (1932): 1184.

374. This strategy worked better for curtailing smallpox (transmitted through face-to-face contact) than yellow fever (communicated by mosquitoes).

375. College of Physicians of Philadelphia, *Proceedings of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Relative to the Prevention of the Introduction and Spreading of Contagious Diseases* (Philadelphia, PA: Thomas Dobson, 1798), 2. The College’s recommendations circulated in Philadelphia newspapers in the following days. “Philadelphia, 27th August, 1793,” *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 27 August 1793, [2]; “For the General Advertiser,” *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, 28 August 1793, [3]; “Philadelphia, August 28, *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, 28 August 1793; “Matthew Clarkson, Mayor,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Journal*, 28 August 1793, [3].

“Every thing that tends to alarm or fright the sick, ought to be prevented,” he insisted.

“The Physicians are making laudable exertions for the safety of the inhabitants—they complain of the bad effect of the Bells—let them, then, be immediately silenced by those whose duty it is—or, as the last alternative—let them be * * * *.”³⁷⁶ A. B. expanded on this theme in a different letter published the following day, this time in *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*.

It has often been observed, that fear creates a susceptibility in the body to disease,—and in low or nervous fevers, a tendency to sink under them. [...] [U]nnecessary terrors may do much injury; and such, is considered the practice of tolling the bells for deceased persons. At best, it can but gratify vanity or old prejudices, and may do harm by spreading alarm among the sick, and dispose the weakly and nervous to danger. It is therefore hoped, that it will, for the present, be discontinued.³⁷⁷

A. B.’s understanding, that the sound of funeral tolling endangered physical health by bringing death unrelentingly to mind, was echoed by Mathew Carey in a report compiled shortly after the the epidemic ended. Before the practice was suspended, Carey recalled, the bells had “been kept pretty constantly going the whole day, so as to terrify those in health, and drive the sick, as far as the influence of imagination could produce that effect,

376. A. B., “For the Federal Gazette,” *Federal Gazette*, 26 August 1793, [3], asterisks in original.

377. A. B., “For the American Daily Advertiser,” *Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser*, 27 August 1793, [3].

to their graves.”³⁷⁸ Medical professionals likewise understood that funeral bells harmed physical health by activating the “passions of the mind.”³⁷⁹

This logic—that the sound of funeral tolling breached bodies through the ears to plant dark thoughts in weak and infirm minds—extended to contexts outside epidemics as populations grew. In the decades following independence, the population density of American cities rose dramatically. In 1790, the population density of Philadelphia was over 40,000 inhabitants per square mile, and by 1800 the density in some neighborhoods was over 93,000 inhabitants per square mile.³⁸⁰ With more people living and dying in the same space, funeral bells sounded with greater frequency, and opponents of the practice warned that the mournful message reached susceptible audiences on a regular basis. In addition to sick persons, listeners at particular risk included those who were female and, less often, those who were studious or nervous.

When concerned citizens took pen in hand to expound the third-person effects of funeral tolling, the demographic they repeatedly turned to for illustration was sick women. Easily confused, emotionally delicate, and possessed by active imaginations,

378. Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States* (Philadelphia: Printed by author, 1793), 23. Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 25255. Accessed 26 Mar 2008.

379. James Tytler, *A Treatise on the Plague and Yellow Fever* (Salem, MA: Joshua Cushing, 1799), 173. Sari Altschuler has written extensively about late-eighteenth-century theories of the relationship between narratives and disease, specifically in the context of the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic. Parties debated the power of rumors and fictional accounts to infect or inoculate sympathetic listeners and readers. Sari B. Altschuler, “National Physiology: Literature, Medicine, and the Invention of the American Body, 1789-1860” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2012).

380. Carole Shammas, “The Space Problem in Early United States Cities,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 57, no. 3 (July 1, 2000): 509, 511. For comparison, the density of present-day Manila is 111,002 persons per square mile.

ailing members of the “fair sex” could be lured beyond the veil by unhappy thoughts.³⁸¹

One “J. M.” of Philadelphia explained the deleterious mechanism through which funeral bells operated by disclosing details of his recent visit with an indisposed relative to readers of the *Freeman’s Journal* in August 1785.

While I was endeavoring to promote a chearfulness that gave some relief, and had got her prevailed on to take some nourishment she stood in much need of—a cursed *funeral toll* just then shot through her ear—and her heart; and finding on enquiry, it was for an acquaintance, the morsel dropt from her hand, she sunk in dejection, and making the melancholy reflection, “that tomorrow might be my turn,” she fainted away, and with great difficulty and skill of a physician was recovered.³⁸²

The incapacitated women who populated these arguments also aptly illustrated the immobility of the funeral bell’s victims. An inability to escape the audible reminders of mortality exacerbated their harmful effects, which is why, surmised a contributor to the *Boston Gazette* in August 1783, the funeral bell presented a special danger to “all child bed women” and “all persons confined to a sick chamber.” Echoing the words of a “learned physician in Europe,” he warned that ““multitudes of child-bed women and sick persons are hummed to their graves by the tolling of bells for funerals.””³⁸³

381. A rare exception was Ann Flower of Philadelphia (d. 12 December 1795), who suffered from nearby funeral bells during an extended illness and requested that no bell toll for her own funeral. Flower’s death notice recounted the suffering of this “amiable young lady,” but it also credited her with having “good sense.” “Philadelphia, Dec. 23, *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, 23 December 1795, [3].

382. J. M., [Letter to the Editor]. *Freeman’s Journal*, August 10, 1785, 2. See also a letter written by “S.” to the editor of the *Federal Gazette*, which explains the effect of funeral tolling accordingly: “the melancholy ideas, naturally associated with the sound, and the hollow notes, vibrating upon the ear, produce a sensation of despondency, which approaches most nearly to the horrors of the damned.” S., [Letter to the Editor]. *Federal Gazette*, May 29, 1790.

383. “A Speculation in Favor of Humanity,” *Boston Gazette*, 11 August 1783, [1].

In the same paragraph that he depicted the peril posed to sickly and female listeners by frequent funeral bells, the above writer assured *Boston Gazette* readers (in a parenthetical aside) that the frequency of tolling was perfectly normal: “[P]erhaps there are as few deaths in this town as in any one of equal number of inhabitants in the world.”³⁸⁴ This was because monitoring funeral processions (and the tolling that assembled them) was one way that both inhabitants and outsiders gauged community health. William Bentley, for one, followed the 1792 smallpox outbreak and inoculation in Boston closely from the relative safety of Salem, Massachusetts. After weeks of gathering updates via newspapers and word of mouth, he noted that reports were generally favorable, “but as all Bells, & processions at funerals are forbidden in Boston during the Inoculation, we have no means at present to judge of the fatality.”³⁸⁵ Elizabeth Drinker likewise used funerals as an index of community health. On August 16, 1793, a full week before Philadelphia newspapers published a word about yellow fever, Drinker, who was residing for the summer near the outlying community of Germantown remarked “’tis a sickly time now in philada. and there has been an unusual number of funerals lately here.”³⁸⁶ In subsequent years, Drinker grew increasingly attentive with the arrival of warm temperatures. The summer of 1799 was particularly fraught with anxiety, as yellow fever had claimed an estimated 3,500 lives the previous year.³⁸⁷ Rumors began to circulate in mid-June, and the likelihood of an outbreak remained a topic of speculation

384. “A Speculation in Favor of Humanity,” *Boston Gazette*, 11 August 1783, [1].

385. Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 1: 393.

386. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 1: 494.

387. R. La Roche, *Yellow Fever, Considered in Its Historical, Pathological, Etiological, and Therapeutical Relations. Including a Sketch of the Disease as It Has Occurred in Philadelphia from 1699 to 1854* (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1855), 85.

(and a recurring theme in Drinker's diary) through the third week of August, when the College of Physicians officially declared an epidemic. In the intervening time, Drinker tracked the mortality rate by conversing with friends and family, reading the city's newspapers, and collecting intelligence from visitors to her home.³⁸⁸ She also listened for funeral bells. On July 29, the sound of a bell "tolling for some one going to their grave" prompted Drinker to question recent assurances that "this month has hitherto been unusaly healthy."³⁸⁹ Two weeks later, with rumors of yellow fever more prevalent, Drinker observed that "every day for many days past, the Bell has tolled for some one gone to their long home."³⁹⁰

Opponents of funeral tolling feared that listeners like Bentley and Drinker, who used funeral bells to monitor community mortality, might attend to the aggregate din without accounting for increases in population density. In a growing urban community, a mistake of this nature could lead to the misperception that a city's death rate was increasing and, consequently, that the city in question was an unhealthy place to live. Concern that certain "gentlemen from the country" (US congressional representatives) would arrive at this erroneous conclusion motivated the New York Common Council to permanently reduce funeral tolling in August 1789.³⁹¹ The issue initially surfaced in April, several months before Congress, then meeting in New York, deliberated the future location of the nation's permanent seat of government. In a letter to the editor of the *New*

388. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 2: 1179-1205.

389. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 2: 1194.

390. Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 2: 1197. Drinker continued to track the death toll daily through late October. Total deaths for the 1799 outbreak are estimated at one thousand. See La Roche, *Yellow Fever*, 90.

391. A Citizen, "Mr. Childs," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 15 April 1789, [2].

York Daily Advertiser, “A Citizen” recommended that New York eradicate a particular nuisance if the city wished to improve its chances of keeping Congress. Some of the city’s illustrious guests, he explained, were put off by the tolling of funeral bells. “The gentlemen from the country complain exceedingly of this noisy unmeaning and absurd custom,” A Citizen warned. “This is the moment to abolish it, and give an evidence of a disposition to please them.”³⁹² The Common Council took up this challenge the following Monday, ordering the preparation of an ordinance.³⁹³ The resulting law, approved on August 19, directed that no bells should toll until a funeral procession was in view of the burial ground and that tolling should cease immediately upon the procession’s arrival.³⁹⁴

The same day that the Common Council passed the law to regulate funeral tolling—three days before the US Senate considered a proposal from citizens of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, advocating for the permanent seat of government to be located “on the banks of the Delaware”³⁹⁵—the *New-York Daily Gazette* reported on the weather ninety miles to the southwest. According to unattributed “accounts from Philadelphia,” temperatures there had been so extreme the previous week that the mayor had ordered “all the meat in market to be carried away and thrown into the Delaware, at 10 o’clock A. M.”³⁹⁶ With the mercury hovering at ninety-six degrees for days at a time, the account

392. Ibid.

393. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 1: 445.

394. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 1: 478. The full text of the law was published in New York newspapers in the following days. See “A Law to Regulate the Ringing or Tolling of the Bells of the Several Churches in this City for Funerals,” *New York Daily Gazette*, August 22, 1789, [3].

395. *Annals of the Congress of the United States* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 1: 67.

396. “By accounts from Philadelphia, we are informed...” *New-York Daily Gazette*, 19 August 1789, [2]. This account of conditions in Philadelphia was placed immediately under the *Daily Gazette*’s regular coverage of Congressional proceedings.

continued, shopkeepers had fled to the countryside for the sake of self-preservation, and sixteen infants had been buried on a single Sunday.³⁹⁷ By Saturday, August 22, the *Daily Gazette*'s "artifices" had reached Philadelphia, and the *Federal Gazette* of that city launched a series of retaliatory articles, which continued through Wednesday of the following week.³⁹⁸ On Monday, August 24, the *Federal Gazette* excerpted a letter from "a gentleman in New-York" who advised his friend in Philadelphia to disregard the "falsehoods" appearing in New York newspapers.³⁹⁹ New Yorkers were going to such extremes to retain the seat of federal government, explained the New York gentleman, that "[t]heir corporation have directed that the bells shall not be rung on the death of any of the inhabitants; lest the members of Congress (already much alarmed by the late mortality) should immediately remove from hence."⁴⁰⁰ The "Gentleman in Philadelphia," whose response the *Federal Gazette* printed the following day, refuted the *Daily Gazette*'s August 19 weather report, point by point, before wondering at the "malevolence" of New Yorkers who would wish the heat in Philadelphia to be "so very contagious and mortal."⁴⁰¹

397. "By accounts from Philadelphia, we are informed..." *New-York Daily Gazette*, 19 August 1789, [2]. This account of conditions in Philadelphia was placed immediately under the *Daily Gazette*'s regular coverage of Congressional proceedings.

398. "Philadelphia, 22 August," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 22 August 1789, [3]. For the full series of the *Federal Gazette*'s retaliatory articles, see "Philadelphia, 24 August," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 24 August 1789, [2]; "Philadelphia, 25 August," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 25 August 1789, [2]; "Philadelphia, 26 August. Intelligence Extraordinary. New-York, August 21," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 26 August 1789, [3]

399. "Philadelphia, 24 August," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 24 August 1789, [2].

400. *Ibid.*, [2].

401. "Philadelphia, 25 August," *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 25 August 1789, [2]. According to the *Federal Gazette*, this reply from the Philadelphia correspondent to his friend in New York was extracted from a letter dated "Aug. 4, 1789." This renders the Philadelphian's point-by-point refutation of the *New York Daily Gazette*'s August 19 weather report astonishingly prescient, and in so doing it raises questions about the flesh-and-blood existence of both correspondents. The most probable explanation is typographical error: "Aug. 4" should be "Aug. 24." Even if the entire exchange was a product of editorial

In addition to worrying that funeral tolling would harm sick listeners and mislead healthy ones, late-eighteenth-century opponents of the practice argued that it had lost its utility. The primary culprit was the frequency of funeral bells, abetted by lengthy durations of tolling. Funeral bells sounded too frequently to prompt listeners to reflect on mortality or even to effectively assemble processions, argued one frustrated detractor, “for there is scarcely any one except the deceased’s particular friends or relations, who can tell whose funeral is to be attended.”⁴⁰² Strangers (an ever-growing segment of urban audiences) found the tolling uninterpretable.⁴⁰³ Other opponents argued that funeral bells were meaningless in a different way: the incessant tolling was a “superficial” and “unmeaning display of grief” that provided no comfort to the bereaved.⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, the frequency and duration of funeral bells impeded their capacity to differentiate—and therefore honor—the dead: the practice was too commonplace to pay proper respect to “the memory of deceased merit.”⁴⁰⁵ “A Citizen” (who so urgently pressed the city of New York to abolish funeral tolling) offered examples of persons whose deaths need not impose on the attention of the living: “an Usurer whose whole life has been a scene of extortion and avarice;” an “old maid whose life has been devoured with spleen, and consumed in useless solitude;” and “an old Bachelor whose putrid carcase has long

puppetry, it is still informative of how the editor (in this case, Andrew Brown) imagined his readership responding.

402. “A Speculation in Favor of Humanity,” *Boston Gazette*, 11 August 1783, [1].

403. A Citizen, “Mr. Childs,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 15 April 1789, [2].

404. J. M., “In a city where truth and reason...” *Philadelphia Freeman’s Journal*, 10 August, 1785, [2].

405. *Ibid.*, [2].

offended the senses.”⁴⁰⁶ In other words, late-eighteenth-century Americans questioned the practicality and desirability of making every burial public.

Three decades after New Yorkers limited funeral tolling in an unsuccessful bid to retain Congress, Bostonians deliberated the purported harms and diminished utility of the practice when considering their own ban on funeral bells. What raised awareness of the issue was a physician’s account of his epiphany (achieved while contemplating the distress of an expired patient) that “*the tolling of bells is a sort of homicide*.”⁴⁰⁷ On the day before her death, the patient in question had seemed more flushed and anxious than usual, so the physician had inquired (“gently, and with great caution”) into the causes.

[S]he turned her deep blue eyes upon me, and with more energy than I had remarked in her for some time, “Doctor,” said she, “if you knew how that HATEFUL BELL strikes on my poor, bewildered brain, you indeed would pity me.” Seeming, then, to try to suppress the tears that were coming—“if,” said she, “it had not such excruciating *regularity* of sound, I could bear it better;—it strikes, and goes to my very heart, and I recover from the misery it inflicts, just in time to spend some dreadful moments in expecting a repetition of my misery from the next succeeding blow. From me, all other sounds are fearfully kept away; but oh! how cruelly does *this one*, break on the silence that reigns around me.”⁴⁰⁸

When the patient learned that medical professionals had repeatedly approached “those who had authority in such matters” about doing away with funeral bells, the physician continued, she tried to imagine who might benefit from the practice, but could think of no

406. A Citizen, “Mr. Childs,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 15 April 1789, [2].

407. “Tolling of Bells,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 27 July 1820, [2].

408. *Ibid.*, [2] (emphasis in original).

one. It was useful to neither worried family and friends, nor to the dead (who could not hear), nor to mourners attending a funeral. And to the sick and the dying it was torturous, even lethal. Later, the physician concluded upon reflection that there was no custom “so useless for any purpose, and so distressing in many relations” as the funeral bell.⁴⁰⁹

It is difficult to know, when reading this account, where the perspective of the flushed patient with the deep blue eyes ends and the interpretation of the insightful physician begins. Their collaborative indictment of the funeral bell alluded to a mechanism, seldom mentioned in eighteenth-century complaints against funeral tolling, that increasingly surfaced in later complaints against fire and churchgoing bells as the nineteenth century progressed. In addition to the familiar mechanism of the funeral bell’s sound bringing melancholy thoughts to mind, the tormented patient described the infliction of harm by audible parameters of the performance—in this case repetition and regularity—which were unmediated by morbid associations. Harm perpetrated indirectly via morbid thoughts and emotions was unique to arguments against funeral tolling, but the capacity to harm with repetition, volume, and duration extended across tower bell practices.

The physician’s account of his distressed patient’s suffering appeared in two Boston newspapers on July 27, 1820. Its subsequent circulation instigated an assessment, in Boston and in other communities, of the funeral bell’s effects—its utility for various purposes and its potential to harm and deceive listeners. The response from newspaper readers and editors overwhelmingly affirmed the physician’s view that the practice of

409. *Ibid.*, [2].

funeral tolling needed to go.⁴¹⁰ Only the *Newburyport Herald* ventured a cautious defense. After conceding that the funeral bell was a relic of the past, the *Herald* remarked that it was a relic still cherished by many and suggested eliminating the practice “by degrees.”⁴¹¹ In Boston, actions soon followed arguments. A letter from a reader printed in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* on July 28, the day after the original plea’s publication, called for the Board of Health to consider abolishing funeral tolling at their next meeting.⁴¹² In two weeks, the ban was approved and slated to take effect on the first of October.⁴¹³

Arguments against the funeral bell implicated an array of audiences, contexts of reception, auditory performance dimensions, and sources of authority, as well as types, degrees, and mechanisms of harm and deception. Providence, Rhode Island, inspired by Boston’s example, soon passed its own ordinance abolishing funeral bells.⁴¹⁴ Editorial commentary, published in the *Rhode-Island American* and the *Providence Gazette* during the weeks preceding the law’s adoption, summarized the case against funeral tolling in the early nineteenth century. Funeral bells intruded on inhabitants’ attention so often—and at moments when they were ill-suited to “ponder on the certainty and absorbing

410. “Tolling of Bells,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 27 July 1820, [2]; “Tolling of Bells,” *Boston Repertory*, 27 July 1820, [2]. For approving responses to and elaborations of the physician’s account, see “By republishing the following observations of a professional gentleman...” *New York Evening Post*, 2 August 1820, [2]; “Bells,” *New York Evening Post*, 3 August, 1820, [2]; “Tolling of Bells,” *Providence Rhode-Island American*, 4 August 1820, [3]; “Tolling Bells,” *Providence Gazette*, 7 August 1820, [3]; “Tolling Bells,” *Providence Gazette*, 24 August 1820, [1]; “Town Meetings,” *Providence Rhode-Island American*, 25 August 1820, [2].

411. “Newburyport, August 1,” *Newburyport Herald*, 1 August 1820, [1].

412. “Tolling of Bells for Funerals,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 28 July 1820, [2].

413. “The tolling of bells at funerals, in Boston, is to be abolished...” *New York American*, 11 August 1820, [2].

414. “At our town-meeting on Tuesday last...” *Providence Patriot*, 2 September 1820, [2].

solemnity of death”—that the sound was “heard with indifference, or not noticed at all.”⁴¹⁵ The tolling was ineffective for honoring the dead, because it was “given without discrimination,” and could be purchased by anyone willing to pay the fee.⁴¹⁶ The “morbid imagination” of sick and dying listeners, of course, could be excited at any moment.⁴¹⁷ Frequent funeral bells (although “no cause for alarm”) could also excite the minds of “persons from the country,” thereby exposing Providence to “injurious reports respecting the state of its health.”⁴¹⁸ And a practice that “originated in superstition” had no business in a civilized, enlightened, refined community.⁴¹⁹

415. *Ibid.*, [3].

416. “Tolling of Bells,” *Providence Rhode-Island American*, 4 August 1820, [3].

417. *Ibid.*, [3].

418. “Town Meetings,” *Providence Rhode-Island American*, 25 August, 1820, [3].

419. “Tolling Bells,” *Providence Gazette*, 7 August, 1820, [3].

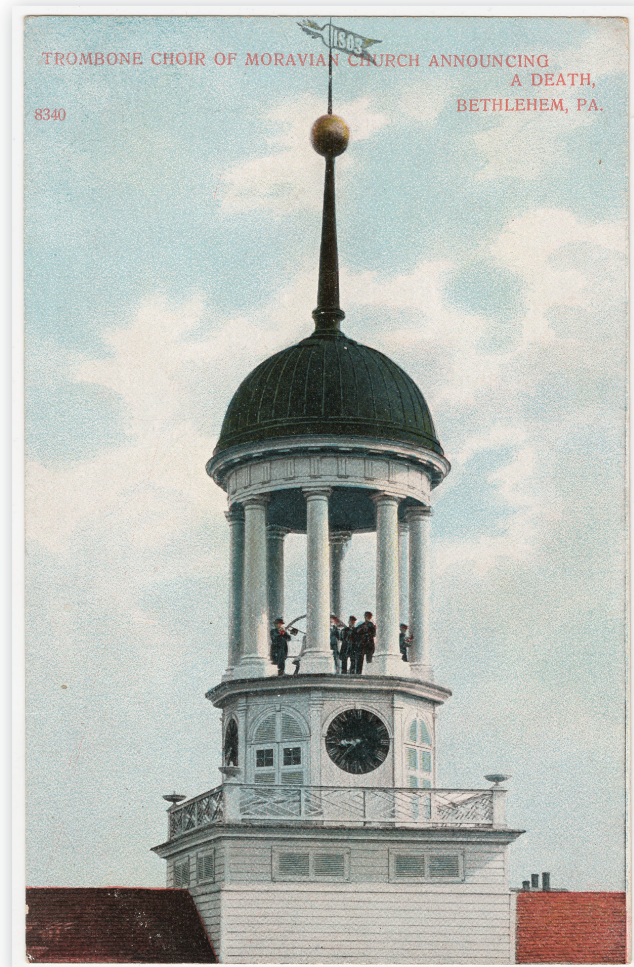


Figure 3.1. Trombone Choir of Moravian Church Announcing a Death, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, circa 1907-1914. Postcard number: 8340. The scene depicted here appears to be an artist's rendition of a photograph, which was printed on postcards mailed circa 1906. Although the trombone choir announced deaths, Bethlehem's Moravian Church used a bell (visible with its wheel behind the cupola's center column) to summon its congregation. (National Trust Library Historic Postcard Collection, University of Maryland Libraries. <http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/6055>.)

14 3 Cloudy & some rain I have not felt at home
 but little Hannah Ballard came
 and made tea & drank 2 cups & then
 and H. Getchel sleep here
 15 4 Clear & was calm 30 m after midn
 to go and see my wife who is in
 Martin about 7 went there was lingering
 5th 11 h 30 m am when she was
 6th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 7th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 8th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 9th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 10th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 11th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 12th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
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 27th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
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 29th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day
 30th 1st of her 6 child of 5th day

Figure 3.2. Martha Ballard used a straight edge to divide each diary page into four columns. In the two left-hand columns, she recorded the day of the month and the day of the week. In the right-hand margin, she summarized the events of each day. Ballard recorded a death knell in the **last line of the entry for Saturday, August 18**, and added the identity of the deceased person ("**Death Old mr Crosby**") in the right-hand margin. Ballard was "**at home**" on both Friday and Saturday, and may have learned of the death knell and, later, the identity of the deceased from either "**mrs Smith**," who visited on Saturday, or "**mr Ballard**" (Ballard's husband), who "**went to Doct Coney**" the same day. (Digital image accessed from <http://dohistory.org/diary/>. Original diary held by Maine State Library.)

CHAPTER FOUR

Attendant Multitudes and Captured Audiences

The doing away with the ringing of bells, the absence of all alarm, and the quiet proceeding of the engines to the fire, under the silent but efficient indications of the Fire Telegraph; the employing of few persons, and those thoroughly competent, are the great things wanted.⁴²⁰

— George Wood, Philadelphia agent of the Royal Insurance Company, 1859

Several years before the New York Common Council suppressed funeral bells to please anxious congressmen, a forerunner of New York's Bravest penned a letter to the editor of the *New York Gazetteer*. After describing the funeral bell's "bad effects" upon the minds of vulnerable listeners (the usual suspects: sick persons and "childbed women"), "A Fireman" warned readers of a second evil: the melancholy message might interfere with listeners' reception of a different audible signal, which, unlike the funeral bell, was essential to public safety. "[I]t is well known that in time of fire, the only rule the citizens have to depend upon for an alarm, is the ringing of the bells," he asserted, "and if this is done indiscriminately, and on so many occasions, we, perhaps, will not know the inconveniency thereof, until we feel it."⁴²¹

When A Fireman made his case in March 1785, few New Yorkers would have disputed the fire bell's indispensability, even if they doubted the funeral bell's potential to interfere with the alarm. New York's built environment, like those of other American cities at the time, was constructed largely of wood—what Stephen Pyne aptly described

420. "George Wood to Thomas Potter, 4 March 1859," in *Report of the Committee on a Paid Fire Department, Made to the Common Council, May 5th, 1859* (Philadelphia, 1859), 20.

421. A Fireman, "From the New-York Gazetteer," *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 March 1785, [3].

as “reconstituted forest” ready for burning—and fire presented a constant threat.⁴²² A decade earlier, during the early months of the Revolution, a conflagration had consumed an estimated one-sixth to one-fourth of the structures in lower Manhattan (Figure 4.1). The extensive devastation on that occasion was widely attributed to an inability to sound an adequate alarm, because the Continental army had requisitioned the city’s bells for artillery.⁴²³ So heavily did public safety depend upon inhabitants hearing and responding to vigorous ringing that the Common Council, when planning the 1785 celebration of American Independence, excluded the bell of City Hall from the festivities, along with the bell of the jail, which “possessed a peculiar sound, known from all others.”⁴²⁴ While other New York bells ushered in the morning alongside cannon fire (a patriotic performance that newspapers dutifully reported), the city’s two primary alarm bells remained quietly vigilant.⁴²⁵

A century later, when J. Frank Kernan collected reminiscences for a history of New York’s volunteer firefighting era, the bell of City Hall no longer sounded for alarms, and the “Old Jail Bell”—which had served in two additional cupolas before perishing in

422. Stephen Pyne, review of *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950*, by Mark Tebeau, *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences* (November 2004). Accessed September 7, 2014. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/22277/reviews/22779/pyne-tebeau-eating-smoke-fire-urban-america-1800-1950>.

423. Benjamin L. Carp, “The Night the Yankees Burned Broadway: The New York City Fire of 1776,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4, no. 2 (2006), 471–511.

424. Augustine E. Costello, *Our Firemen. A History of the New York Fire Departments, Volunteer and Paid* (New York: Augustine E. Costello, 1887), 61.

425. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 1: 150. For newspaper accounts of New York bells ringing for the city’s 1785 Independence Day festivities, see “New-York, July 6,” *New York Independent Journal*, 6 July 1785, [3]; “New-York, July 5,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, 8 July 1785, [2]; “New-York, July 6,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Mercury*, 8 July 1785, [2]; “New-York, July 7,” *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, 9 July 1785, [2]; “New-York, July 4,” *Hartford American Mercury*, 11 July 1785, [2]; “New-York, July 4,” *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 11 July 1785, [2]; “New-York, July 6,” *Baltimore Maryland Journal*, 12 July 1785, [2].

the “Broad Street explosion” of 1845—persisted only in the memories of retired New York “fire laddies.”⁴²⁶ Ringing a bell to summon firefighters no longer merited protection for the sake of public safety; in fact, following the formation of a full-time, paid firefighting force and the installation of a fire telegraph system, the city’s fire commissioners had set out to *eliminate* alarm bells. Alarm ringing contributed unnecessarily to the chaos of fires, they argued, and the salaries of bell ringers drained funds from municipal coffers. Most seriously, the bells publicized the location of a fire indiscriminately to the entire audience within earshot.⁴²⁷ Commissioner Joseph L. Perley, when questioned in June 1873 about the board’s controversial decision to discontinue alarm ringing below 33rd Street, responded simply that “[t]he ringing of bells collects mobs that seriously impede the working of the firemen.”⁴²⁸

This chapter addresses the uses and eventual disengagement of tower bells from fire alarm systems in America’s three most populous cities at the end of the Revolution: New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. The pressures of urbanization—more inhabitants, of increasing social diversity, living (and building) in closer proximity, and collectively occupying more space—were at the center of changes to firefighting labor and the communication of alarm. The communities in question afford a particularly advantageous

426. Costello, *Our Firemen*, 240, 271, 445; J. Frank Kernan, *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddies and Volunteer Fire Departments of New York and Brooklyn* (New York: M. Crane, 1885), 215-16; George William Sheldon, *The Story of the Volunteer Fire Department of the City of New York* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 32, 45, 184, 221-22, 413. The Broad Street explosion occurred on July 19, 1845, when an early morning fire spread to a warehouse (on Broad Street) storing saltpeter.

427. Commissioners of the Metropolitan Fire Department, *Annual Reports of the Board of Commissioners of the Metropolitan Fire Department for the Years 1865 and 1866* (New York: Baker & Godwin, 1867), 5, 58; Commissioners, *Third Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York* (New York, 1868), 6.

428. “Ring the Fire Bells. The New Departure of the Fire Commissioners,” *New York Herald*, 21 June 1873, 8.

comparison of the adoption of fire telegraphy. Boston and New York implemented versions of this innovation—quite differently—at nearly the same moment, and Philadelphia scrutinized both systems carefully when reorganizing its own firefighting and alarm systems shortly thereafter. Despite this advantage, the close comparison of three northern port cities does leave untold a compelling chapter in the fire bell’s story: its roles and fates in Southern communities during the Civil War, after General P. G. T. Beauregard called upon God-fearing, patriotic citizens of the Confederacy to sacrifice every bell that could possibly be spared to be refashioned as cannon.⁴²⁹ How Southern congregations yielded their church bells to a cause they perceived to be holy is a topic I have addressed elsewhere,⁴³⁰ but the consequences of these same bells “howling” on the battlefield for a Yankee surrender, rather than summoning firefighters at home, remains to be investigated.⁴³¹

I approach the fire bell’s adaptations and decline as a story about logistical communication, a concept I adopt (and adapt) from John Durham Peters. Calendars, clocks, and towers exemplify a neglected class of media, according to Peters, which “establish the central points around which culture rotates” by “arrang[ing] people and property into time and space.”⁴³² I hesitate to designate bells (or the towers they inhabit,

429. P. G. T. Beauregard, “To the Planters of the Mississippi Valley,” *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, 19 March, 1862, [2].

430. Deborah Lubken, “Death Metal: American Tower Bells in War and Its Aftermath,” presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Boston, May 2011.

431. “John Morgan’s Late Raid into Kentucky,” *Macon Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1863, [4]. To include this dimension of the fire bell’s history would require incorporating the firefighting histories of New Orleans, which introduced its fire alarm telegraph system in June 1860, and Charleston, which launched its fire alarm telegraph system shortly after the surrender of Fort Sumter.

432. John Durham Peters, “Calendar, Clock, Tower,” in *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things In Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow, 25–42 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 41.

or the clock mechanisms to which they are harnessed) as intrinsically logistical, but I find it incredibly useful to think about bells performing logistical work as components of fire alarm systems. From within these systems, bells oriented listeners and, by extension, directed labor, resources, and (sometimes) mischief to the locations of fires. Through the end of the eighteenth century, the fire bell appealed to civic duty and human curiosity, compelling listeners to “come here.” As populations swelled and municipal territories expanded, cities reconfigured their emergency communication systems, enabling the fire bell to direct responders to an increasingly specific “there.” For all this precision in indicating geographic location, the fire bell was never able to address a selected audience, and this is the primary reason it fell into disuse. As cities entrusted the work of extinguishing fires to a small and specialized workforce, the fire bell continued to alarm everyone.

Fewer and Fewer Hands

The reorganization of firefighting labor in American cities, from voluntary associations to publicly operated, professional departments, is a topic historians have addressed at length. The volunteer system, they have generally conceded, cohered in a masculine, sometimes violent, working-class culture—although accounts differ over the degree of violence and the relative influence of class versus gender in shaping this culture.⁴³³ The dissolution of the volunteer system during the second half of the

433. Amy S. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Bruce Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s,” in *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class*

nineteenth century came about through a confluence of factors related to urbanization and industrialization: cities expanded, demographically and geographically; technological innovation enabled machines to replace manpower; political and social elites, struggling to preserve order, resolved to discipline the rowdy culture of volunteer fire companies; and a burgeoning fire insurance industry prioritized preserving property over extinguishing fires.⁴³⁴ The result, Mark Tebeau has argued, was that the work of firefighting grew increasingly specialized and fell to “fewer and fewer hands.”⁴³⁵

To imagine how these factors collectively reduced and restructured the firefighting workforce over the course of the nineteenth century, it is useful to begin with a firsthand account of a December 1796 fire in Boston, a time and place when the fire bell called to action a majority of the audience within earshot. In the early hours of the morning, William Priest, visiting from London, awoke to “a concert truly horrible”: cries of fire, “the jingling of all the church bells,” and engines rattling through the streets.⁴³⁶ Because the commotion made sleep impossible, Priest (who was free to observe, in part, because his status as an outsider exempted him from an obligation to participate) rose from bed to find the city illuminated and bustling with activity. “When the alarm is given

Life, 1790-1940, edited by Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, 71–88 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973); Neilly, “The Violent Volunteers”; Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Neilly, “The Violent Volunteers.” Earlier scholarship (Neilly and Laurie) emphasized the violence of volunteer firefighting culture and focused primarily on class. More recent scholars (Greenberg and Tebeau) have argued (1) that volunteer firefighters’ reputation for violence was exaggerated by contemporaries and (2) that gender was as important as class (in Greenberg’s case, *more* important than class) in defining firefighting culture in the volunteer era.

434. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm*; Bruce Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark; Tebeau, *Eating Smoke*; Neilly, “The Violent Volunteers”; Tarr, “The Municipal Telegraph Network: Origins of the Fire and Police Alarm Systems in American Cities,” *Flux* 8, no. 9 (1992), 5-18.

435. Tebeau, *Eating Smoke*, 16.

436. William Priest, *Travels in the United States of America* (London: J. Johnson, 1802), 169.

at night,” he explained to a correspondent in London, “the female part of the family immediately place candles in the windows.”⁴³⁷ While women lit candles to shed light on dark streets, men headed outside with buckets: “Every master of a family belongs to a fire-company; there are several in town, composed of every class of citizens, who have entered into a contract to turn out with two buckets at the first fire alarm.”⁴³⁸ Priest followed responders down narrow streets to the site of the fire, where he watched them successfully extinguish the flames. “Each engine had a double row, extending to the nearest water; one row passed the full, and the other the empty buckets. The citizens not employed at the engines were pulling down the adjacent buildings, or endeavoring to save the furniture.”⁴³⁹

The activities described by Priest in Boston are representative of arrangements in New York and Philadelphia during nighttime fires, which constituted the worst-case scenario city dwellers prepared for and dreaded. The commotion of a fire alarm demanded everyone’s attention, and the work of moving resources and personnel to extinguish the fire involved a significant portion of the adult population. Women, as well as persons who were elderly or disabled, illuminated the darkness with candlelight to help responders navigate.⁴⁴⁰ Able-bodied householders and other white male inhabitants who

437. Ibid., 169

438. Ibid., 168.

439. Ibid., 169-70.

440. Illuminating windows was a duty required of members by volunteer fire companies in Philadelphia and of inhabitants by municipal ordinance in New York. See “Articles of the Union Fire Company, 31, January 1743,” in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Leonard W. Larabee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 2: 375-76; *Laws and Ordinances Ordained and Established by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonality of the City of New York, in Common Council Convened, During the Mayoralty of Jacob Radcliff. Passed the Fifth Day of May, 1817* (New York: T. and J., Swords, 1817), 78; George Cuthbert Gillespie, “Early Fire Protection and the Use of Fire Marks,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 46, no. 3 (1922): 251; John W. Jordan, William Callender, John Pole, Jno. Lukens,

belonged to a mutual aid fire society were bound by membership to respond, with buckets and bags, and to assist if a member's property was endangered.⁴⁴¹ An alarm in Boston at this time also summoned the city's "engine men" (companies of approximately fifteen citizens appointed by the selectmen) to retrieve one of eleven municipal fire engines from locations throughout the city.⁴⁴² Today we commonly think of a fire engine as a vehicle for transporting firefighters and their equipment, but at the turn of the nineteenth century it was firefighters who transported the engine, by pulling it through the streets. The engine's job was to "throw water" on flames.⁴⁴³ In exchange for their services, members of engine companies were exempted from military duty, and the first

and Joseph Trotter, "The Fellowship Fire Company of Philadelphia, Organized 1738," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 27, no. 4 (1903): 474.

441. For examples of the rules governing these mutual aid fire societies, see *These Presents Witness, That We the Subscribers, as Neighbours and Friends, Do Mutually Agree to the Following Articles...* (Boston, MA, 1740), Evans American Imprints, Series 1, no. 39802; *Anti-Stamp Fire Society, Rules and Orders to Be Observed by the Anti-Stamp Fire Society, Instituted in Boston, October 1763* (Boston, MA, 1765), Evans American Imprints, Series 1, no. 41332; *Union Fire Club, Rules and Orders Agreed to Be Observed by the Union Fire-Club, Instituted at Boston, September 1st, 1772* (Boston, MA, 1772), Evans American Imprints, Series 1, no. 42318. In addition to these mutual assistance fire societies, city governments supplied buckets for firefighting, either by purchasing a supply (Boston), running a subscription drive (Philadelphia), or passing ordinances that required homeowners and landlords to maintain a specified number of buckets (New York). For early regulations, see *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, 1704 to 1776* (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1847), 296-97, 305, 307-08, 340, 342, 409; *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, Jo. Severns, 1852), 1: 478; *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638-1674*, Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, ed. (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1868), 82, 322-24; *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1881), 2: 122, 7: 56; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776*, 1: 255, 4: 82-83; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1884), 3: 1883.

442. *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston, MA: Adams & Nourse, 1784), 168-69; *The By-Laws and Town-Orders of the Town of Boston* (Boston, MA: Edmund Freeman, 1786), 39-41. For additional measures to appoint firemen and purchase, maintain, and operate engines, in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, see *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 2:118, 7: 125, 130, 132, 162; 8: 23; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776*, 4: 54, 82, 122, 168, 319, 404, 436-40; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, 1704 to 1776*, 157, 169, 288-89, 296.

443. The *Oxford Dictionary of English*, third edition, defines a fire engine as "a vehicle for carrying firefighters and equipment for fighting larger fires." The similarly titled *Oxford English Dictionary*, in contrast, defines a fire engine as "a machine for throwing water to extinguish fires." See *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, 2010); *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

company to throw water on a fire could apply to the city for a premium.⁴⁴⁴ At the site of the fire, the majority of responders formed a bucket brigade, like the one described by Priest, between the nearest source of water and a location from which the engine could project a stream onto the fire. (See Figure 4.2.) The engine men generated pressure by pumping a lever with either their hands or feet. Everyone present was subject to the command of “firewards”: prominent citizens appointed by the selectmen and empowered to compel assistance, set guards over property, and even blow up structures to keep fires from spreading.⁴⁴⁵

The reorganization of firefighting labor is perhaps most obviously attributable to technological advances, which were perceived by some contemporaries as improvements and, by others, as incursions. Street lighting (first oil, then gas) rendered candlelight illumination unnecessary, along with the participation of women in performing that service. Immense municipal water distribution systems (notably the Fairmount Water Works in Philadelphia, the Croton Aqueduct in New York, and a reservoir system in Boston) delivered water through pipes (initially made of wood), which responders could access through “fire plugs” or hydrants. Improvements to hose dramatically reduced the number of personnel needed to convey water to engines, allowing cities to dispense with bucket brigades. Exchanging buckets for hose also engendered a new division of labor around the care, transportation, and use of the new technology. Previously, the work of

444. In 1794, this premium for “playing first” on a fire was one pound and eight shillings. See *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 27: 239.

445. *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To Which Are Prefixed the Charters of the Province* (Boston, MA: Wright & Potter, 1869), 1: 677; *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 11: 217.

supplying equipment (the buckets) and transporting water to the site of the fire rested with the community at large, even if the job of “throwing” water on flames was left to specialists operating an engine. When communities exchanged buckets for hose, they relinquished the remaining responsibility of firefighting to the “small cadre of men” belonging to hose and hydrant companies.⁴⁴⁶ As newer engines demanded additional manpower (by 1825, larger engines called for upwards of fifty men to work the brakes), the membership of volunteer companies grew, and firefighters gained a reputation for rowdy behavior and political sway. Consequently, mayors, aldermen, and anxious reformers welcomed the arrival of steam-powered engines in the 1850s. Steam engines were pulled by horses, rather than people, and therefore reduced the muscle required for transporting equipment as well as for powering engines. The dissolution of volunteer fire companies soon followed. In city after city, Amy Greenberg has shown, the acquisition of a few steam engines preceded the reorganization to a paid, professional department, often over the protests of volunteer firefighters.⁴⁴⁷

How cities entrusted firefighting responsibilities to fewer and fewer hands is, of course, more complicated than a rundown of major technological developments. These innovations were produced, modified, embraced, and protested by people and institutions with varying interests, in specific cultural and material contexts, and in response to particular events. The adaptation of hose for firefighting is a good case in point. Fire companies in all three cities had short (20-foot) lengths of hose in their inventories by the

446. Tebeau, *Eating Smoke*, 19. See also Neilly, “Violent Volunteers,” 24-32.

447. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm*, 125-51. See also Costello, *Our Firemen*, 782; Tebeau, *Eating Smoke*, 126-68.

1790s, but hose did not become essential firefighting equipment until the 1810s in Philadelphia and New York, and until the late 1820s in Boston.⁴⁴⁸ The substantial technical advance was made by Abraham Pennock and James Sellers, members of Philadelphia's first hose company, who substituted rivets for hand stitching. Their improved design, exhibited as early as 1811 and patented in 1818, produced a significantly stronger hose that could convey larger volumes of water and was less prone to leak.⁴⁴⁹ But the rise of hose (and the corresponding fall of buckets) coincided with the arrival of municipal plumbing, and the ramifications of conveying water to fire in a new way were social as well as technical.

The aspiring (and underage) members of the Philadelphia Hose Company convened their first meeting on December 15, 1803, two years after the Centre Square Works (the city's first water distribution system) began supplying water to hydrants, and two days after a quick-moving fire threatened to level an entire upscale city block.⁴⁵⁰ Several months previously, Philadelphians had witnessed the advantages of hose, in combination with the new hydrants, for extinguishing fires tucked away beyond the convenient reach of engines, and the newly formed company determined to exploit this

448. Arthur Wellington Brayley, *A Complete History of the Boston Fire Department: Including the Fire-Alarm Service and the Protective Department, from 1630 to 1888* (Boston, MA: John P. Dale, 1889), 1: 105, 117-20, 139-40, 151-54; Costello, *Our Firemen*, 58, 71, 80; Neilly, "Violent Volunteers," 24-27; Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 3: 1885; Sheldon, *Story of the Volunteer Fire Department*, 15-16. The New York Common Council freed citizens from the obligation of supplying buckets in December 1819. See *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 10: 659, 673.

449. "A Card. The Philadelphia Hose Company will exhibit for trial, an original specimen of RIVET HOSE..." *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, 30 August 1811, [3]; Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 3: 1896.

450. Philadelphia Hose Company, *Historical Sketches of the Formation and Founders of the Philadelphia Hose Company* (Philadelphia, PA, 1854), 35-36; Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 1: 510; "Fire," *Philadelphia Aurora General Advertiser*, 14 December 1803, [2]. See also Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 3: 1712-13.

utility on a larger scale.⁴⁵¹ After three months of fundraising and constructing, they hauled six hundred feet of freshly manufactured leather hose to a narrow alleyway, where they proceeded to extinguish their first fire and to upend the established order of things.⁴⁵² Rather than supplying water to the engine of a waiting fire company, the hose company's commander "carried the attachment from the hydrant on to the fire, and with a pipe, played directly from the hose," actions that vexed the "very worthy citizen" commanding the engine.⁴⁵³

[H]e became impatient at the non-arrival of the expected water from the hose, and on ascertaining the cause, proceeded to the hose director, who was, as he thought, usurping the functions of the engine. The engine director demanded the water; the hose director refused to yield the pipe. The engine director became warm, indignant, vexed and forcible; the hose director resolute and silent. At last, to give a finishing argument to the hose director, he cried out with some excitement, "If thee don't put the water in the engine, I'll kick thee"—; but the noise of the crowd drowned the last words, and the engine had on that occasion to be satisfied with the bucket supply.⁴⁵⁴

This account of the company's first engagement—wherein its youthful founders vanquished a fire, flouted the authority of a prominent citizen, and won the praise of an admiring public—constituted a staple episode in the organization's origin story. The

451. "Distressing Occurrence," *Philadelphia Repository*, 27 August 1803, 278. See also Drinker, *Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 3: 1678.

452. Philadelphia Hose Company, *Historical Sketches*, 37-38. The fire in question ignited on April 2, 1804, in Harmony Court, an alley located north of Walnut Street between Third and Fourth Streets.

453. *Ibid.*, 40.

454. *Ibid.*, 40. In this telling of the story, quoted from an address given at the organization's fiftieth anniversary celebration, the engine director's use of "thee" ("I'll kick thee") implied that the "worthy citizen" in question was a Quaker. The delivery of the threat in egalitarian plain speech added a pinch of irony and underscored the speaker's flummoxed state.

satisfaction members derived from the anecdote's conclusion had as much to do with social defiance as with technological revolution.

The idea of hose caught on quickly in Philadelphia: seven additional companies sprang up within two years of the Philadelphia Hose Company extinguishing its first fire.⁴⁵⁵ Buckets remained in use for another decade, until the Fairmount Water Works began pumping water to city hydrants at a higher pressure.⁴⁵⁶ In New York, where fire plugs and hydrants were later to arrive and less abundant, fire companies adapted hose in a different way: they standardized hose couplings across companies, which enabled any engine to feed water to another. George Darracott marveled at this cooperation among companies in May 1825, while investigating New York's firefighting system at the bidding of Boston's mayor and city council. Rather than "passing the water in buckets, and every engine crowding into the immediate vicinity of the fire, impeding each other's operations," he reported, New York firefighters united "the whole hose of the city" to keep one engine well-supplied and extinguish the fire efficiently.⁴⁵⁷ Aware that Boston firefighters were acquainted with the hose system and held it in low opinion, Darracott also recommended New York's hierarchical command structure. Investing supreme authority in a chief engineer, he suggested, should pre-empt any quarreling over "who shall play on the fire, or who shall lead the water."⁴⁵⁸

455. Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 3: 1911.

456. Neilly, "Violent Volunteers," 35; Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 1: 561. As Philadelphia firefighters increasingly relied upon hose, underaged youths organized "bucket companies" to salvage discarded buckets and transport them to fires. Fourteen of these companies organized between 1818 and 1822. See Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 3: 1911-12.

457. "Boston, June 1, 1825," *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 30 June 1825, [1].

458. *Ibid.*, [1].

John Quincy III, Boston's mayor and the recipient of Darracott's letter, published these recommendations in local newspapers and forwarded them to members of the Massachusetts legislature, who at the time were considering a bill that would allow Boston to establish its first municipal fire department. In his own appeal to members of the legislature, Quincy insisted that replacing buckets with hose was essential to reforming the city's firefighting system. Unlike Darracott, who admired New York firefighters' use of hose to quickly convey large volumes of water over substantial distances, Quincy measured the value of hose in terms of workforce reduction. "[I]t is proved," he asserted, "that *every hundred feet of hose* is as effectual as the presence of *sixty men* with buckets."⁴⁵⁹ Making this transaction would allow Boston to dispense with the underlying source of everything wrong with its current system: "the attendant multitude."⁴⁶⁰ When Boston's population was small and homogenous, Quincy explained, the system of firewards and mutual aid associations had worked, but the city's inhabitants grew more numerous and diverse every day.⁴⁶¹ They turned up at fires out of "idle curiosity" and "worse motives" rather than to assist their distressed neighbors, and they recognized neither the faces nor the authority of firewards—those influential appointees "of character and property" tasked with compelling cooperation from fellow citizens.⁴⁶²

459. Josiah Quincy, *A Municipal History of the Town and City of Boston during Two Centuries* (Boston, MA: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1852), 184.

460. *Ibid.*, 184.

461. Boston's population in 1820 was approximately 43,000. By 1830, it had risen to over 61,000. Campbell Gibson, "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990," Tables 5 and 6, Population Division Working Paper No. 27, US Bureau of the Census (June 1998). <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html#notes>. Accessed 3 June 2009.

462. Quincy, *Municipal History*, 184.

Moreover, the security afforded by fire insurance had rendered the community's propertied classes less enthusiastic about serving as firewards or joining mutual aid fire associations. Why maintain buckets to extinguish fires if any losses would be covered?⁴⁶³ The only tenable solution, Quincy concluded, was for the city to appropriate funds for hose and additional engines, and to entrust the city's protection to a firefighting workforce that was small, specialized, and subordinate. The multitude, he emphasized repeatedly, was no longer desired to attend.

The Multitude

The Massachusetts legislature passed the act to establish Boston's fire department in June 1825, and the citizens of Boston narrowly approved the measure in July, despite opposition.⁴⁶⁴ The new department, designed by Mayor Quincy and members of the city council, was subordinate in structure, with one chief engineer having "sole and absolute control and command" of twenty assistant engineers (one of whom was George Darracott) and hundreds of volunteers.⁴⁶⁵ The transition from buckets to hose took place

463. Quincy, *Municipal History*, 184, 187-88.

464. An Act Establishing a Fire Department in the City of Boston, (18 June 1825), *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts, in the Year 1825*, Chapter 52 (Boston, MA: Secretary of the Commonwealth, 1825). The results of the July 7 vote were 1347 in favor and 1164 against. "Meeting of the Citizens," *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 9 July 1825, [2]. For views printed in Boston newspapers before the vote, see Admonition, "Messrs. Ballard & Wright," *Independent Chronicle & Boston Patriot*, 2 July 1825, [4]; "Messrs. Editors," *Independent Chronicle & Boston Patriot*, 2 July 1825, [4]; The People, "Fire Department—No. II," *Independent Chronicle & Boston Patriot*, 2 July 1825, [4]; The People, "Fire Department!—No. III," *Independent Chronicle & Boston Patriot*, 2 July 1825, [4]; The Mechanics of Boston, "Communication," *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 2 July 1825, [2]; John Quincy, "To the Citizens of Boston," *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 6 July 1825, [2].

465. An Ordinance for the Preventing and Extinguishing of Fires, and Establishing an Fire Department (5 December 1825), *The Charter of the City Council of Boston, and Ordinances Made and Established by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Common Council* (Boston, 1827), 127; "Thirty-First Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department, 1868," *Documents of the City of Boston* (hereafter *DCB*), 1, no. 37 (1869), 164. (The 1827 report of the Boston Fire Department is republished in this volume.)

more gradually. Although the city council appropriated funds for hose, they also purchased five hundred pairs of leather buckets within four months of passing the ordinance.⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, buckets remained the primary equipment of an entire division of firefighting labor. At the sound of an alarm, engine men were to “repair forthwith” to their engines, hose men to their hose wagons, and “fire” men to a pair of leather buckets, provided by the city and kept in their homes.⁴⁶⁷ All told, though, the new fire department took shape much as Quincy had imagined—with the exception of the multitude, who continued to attend fires.

Although Quincy conceived the multitude as a recent phenomenon, unwanted responders had always attended Boston fires. In fact, Boston fire ordinances had routinely referenced the multitude’s undesirable elements since the early 1700s, when firewards were charged with keeping an eye out for “evil-minded, wicked persons” who might “rob, plunder, purloin, imbezel, convey away, or conceal” the property of others.⁴⁶⁸ Philadelphia had its own troubles with “wicked People” exploiting the chaos of fires.⁴⁶⁹ Members of that city’s first mutual assistance fire company pledged to stand guard at the doors of each others’ burning homes to prevent “suspicious Persons” from entering or

466. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1826, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 4: 21-23, 37, 152. By 1827, when the department submitted its first annual report, most engine companies carried at least two hundred feet of hose, but they also carried around a dozen buckets. See “Thirty-First Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department,” 164-66.

467. An Ordinance for the Preventing and Extinguishing of Fires, and Establishing an Fire Department (5 December 1825), *Charter of the City Council of Boston*, 127-35.

468. An Act Providing, In Case of Fire, for the More Speedy Extinguishment Thereof, and for the Preserving of Goods Endangered Thereby (17 October 1711), *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To Which Are Prefixed the Charters of the Province* (Boston, MA: Wright & Potter, 1869), 678. Boston’s population at this time was roughly 9,000 inhabitants.

469. “To the Publisher of the GAZETTE,” *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, 31 December 1733.

removing property.⁴⁷⁰ New York's fire wardens were to keep away all "idle and suspected persons," a phrase dating back as far as Henry VII's 1495 Vagabonds Act.⁴⁷¹ In all three cities, differentiating sympathetic responders from their malevolent counterparts became more challenging as populations grew and unfamiliar faces multiplied. But the multitude's presence at fires was extraordinarily difficult to prevent as long as the alarm system included bells. Anyone who attended (listened) could attend (respond).

Without stealing undue agency from the people who communicate in and through media, it is possible (even practical) to acknowledge that the affordances of a technology influence the form and content of communication. Bells present different possibilities and limitations than pencils or printing presses.⁴⁷² People can make bells say and symbolize many things, from within larger communication systems, but some messages and representations are more difficult than others to express. "Come here," is relatively easy for a bell to say, and this was the fire bell's unambiguous message in most communities through the eighteenth century. Any ringing outside the familiar schedule (e.g., bells for market, curfew, and church services) was assumed to indicate a fire somewhere in the vicinity of the ringing bell. As communities grew, they devised ways to make bells say "go there"—to indicate the general location of a fire relative to a fixed point—and, later,

470. "Articles of the Union Fire Company, 7 December 1736." Accessed September 22, 2014. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0024>.

471. *Laws and Ordinances Ordained and Established by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonality of the City of New York, in Common Council Convened, During the Mayoralty of Jacob Radcliff. Passed the Fifth Day of May, 1817* (New York: T. and J., Swords, 1817), 72; James Dunstan, *A Treatise on the Poor Law of England* (London: Shaw and Sons, 1850), 49.

472. John Durham Peters, "Why We Use Pencils and Other Thoughts on the Archive: (An Afterword)," in *Media History and the Archive*, edited by Craig Robertson, 108–20 (London: Routledge, 2011).

to direct responders and resources to a designated geographic area. What reformers could not change was the fire bell's implied addressee: everyone. It is nearly impossible for a bell to address a niche audience without alerting all listeners within earshot. At best, and with careful planning, it is possible to temporarily deceive or confuse some listeners for a short time.

Bells address the multitude indiscriminately, and they are notoriously impossible to un-ring.⁴⁷³ The fire bell reached an audience that was larger and more widely scattered than did cries of “fire!” or the rasp of a watchman's rattle, and once responders began coming here or going there, it was difficult to arrest their progress. Consequently, the fire bell's involvement exacerbated the cost of false and mistaken alarms: large numbers of volunteers would abandon their regular work and race through the streets, endangering themselves and others, until news caught up that no fire existed. Ringing a bell “as for fire” (a common phrase found throughout early ordinances and firsthand accounts of alarms) also presented an opportunity to deliberately throw significant parts of a community into urgent—and somewhat predictable—patterns of behavior for reasons other than firefighting. On a Sunday afternoon in June 1837, a bell rung “as for fire”—but for reasons other than fire—led an unsuspecting Boston engine company to the wrong place at the wrong time, resulting in one of the worst race riots in the city's history.

Events leading to the Broad Street Riot were difficult for contemporaries to immediately establish. The *Boston Post* openly acknowledged this challenge in its initial

473. The saying, “it is not an easy task to unring a bell,” is attributed to Thomas McBride, chief justice of the Oregon Supreme Court, in 1912. Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred R. Shapiro, eds., *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 19.

report of the event, remarking that there were “nearly as many rumors in circulation, as to the origin of the disturbance, as there were parties engaged in it.”⁴⁷⁴ The investigative committee appointed by the city council likewise admitted to difficulty in ascertaining all the facts of the matter—although the committee rose above any uncertainty when writing their official report, which exonerated firefighters of wrongdoing and found fault, instead, with various bodies of “the Irish.”⁴⁷⁵ All accounts agreed that the initial confrontation unfolded after Engine Company No. 20 returned from a fire to discover a large number of the city’s Irish inhabitants (estimated at between three and five hundred) forming a funeral procession at the corner of East and Broad Streets, outside the engine house.⁴⁷⁶ (Figure 4.3.) In the process of putting away the engine (or venturing between the engine house and a nearby business for “refreshments”), an engine man was shoved (or fell) from the sidewalk, and a scuffle ensued. The scuffle quickly gained participants, and the engine men, who were vastly outnumbered by even conservative estimates, pulled their engine back into the street and rang its bell to warn away the advancing crowd.⁴⁷⁷

474. “Riot in Boston,” *Newport Rhode-Island American*, 14 June 1837, [2] (reprinted from *Boston Post*, 12 June 1837).

475. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1837, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 15: 212-220. Among other failings, “the Irish” customarily attended funerals in large numbers, and were quick to interpret accidental offenses as intentional. Throughout the report, the investigative committee presented members of the Irish community as aggressors and firemen as misunderstood participants who acted in self defense. This explanation would ring truer if the fireman had not defended their way up Broad Street and into an Irish neighborhood to destroy homes and beat residents.

476. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1837, 15: 212-220. Various accounts of the riot circulated in newspapers in the days immediately following the incident. The details I present here are primarily from the city council’s official report, with alternate accounts indicated parenthetically. These alternate accounts include “Riot in Boston,” *Newport Rhode-Island American*, 14 June 1837, [2] (reprinted from *Boston Post*, 12 June 1837); “Riot in Boston,” *Amherst Farmer’s Cabinet*, 16 June 1837, [3]; “From the Atlas,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, 17 June 1837, [2]; “Incendiarism and Riot in Boston,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 20 June 1837, [2]; “Alarming Riot—Collision of the Firemen with the Irish,” *New London Connecticut Gazette*, 21 June 1837, [2]; “Grand Row in Boston—Sunday, June 11,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 22 June 1837, 2.

477. The official report estimated the funeral procession participants to have numbered between three and five hundred. Engine Company No. 20 had 47 official members in 1836, and “runners” (youths

Meanwhile, someone rang the bell of the New South Church, at the intersection of Summer and Bedford Streets.⁴⁷⁸ The officers of Engine Company No. 20 managed to pull their men indoors, and the funeral procession made its way up Broad Street—where it encountered Engine Company No. 14, who had continued down Summer Street, searching for the purported fire, after responding to the alarm sounded on the bell of the New South Church.⁴⁷⁹ This interruption of the funeral procession, the investigative committee decided, was “almost unavoidable,” but the Irish, having just exited an altercation with firefighters, took offense.⁴⁸⁰ Another fight commenced, this time with makeshift clubs and projectiles.⁴⁸¹ Other fire companies soon arrived (newspaper accounts identified six more engine companies), additional assailants joined the fray, and the violence, destruction, and looting rampaged for another two hours, through a predominantly Irish neighborhood.⁴⁸²

who helped pull the engines and hose wagons) may have been present. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 15: 213. *The Boston Almanac and Business Directory* (Sampson, Murdock, & Company, 1836), pages unnumbered, see section on Fire Department.

478. The authors of the official report, who refrained from identifying fire department personnel throughout, simply stated that the bell “was rung.” Newspaper accounts reported that the engine company dispatched a man to ring the bell. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 15: 213; “Riot in Boston,” *Newport Rhode-Island American*, 14 June 1837, [2] (reprinted from *Boston Post*, 12 June 1837); “Grand Row in Boston—Sunday, June 11,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 22 June 1837, 2.

479. Newspaper accounts of the riot, including an interview with a foreman of Engine Company No. 20, suggest that other engine companies (No. 8 in particular) responded with the intent of fighting Irishmen rather than fire. I have found nothing to suggest that Engine Company No. 14 knew of the riot before they barreled into the funeral procession, and the trajectory of their response suggests they were genuinely searching for the location of the reported fire when they approached the intersection of Broad and Summer Streets. For the interview with Engine Company No. 20’s foreman (who readily admitted to sending for the aid of Engine Company No. 8), see “From the Atlas,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, 17 June 1837, [2].

480. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 15: 214.

481. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1837, entry for June 22, 1837.

482. “Riot in Boston,” *Newport Rhode-Island American*, 14 June 1837, [2] (reprinted from *Boston Post*, 12 June 1837); “From the Atlas,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, 17 June 1837, [2]; “Grand Row in Boston—Sunday, June 11,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 22 June 1837, 2. Contemporary accounts estimated that twelve thousand persons either participated in or turned out to observe the riot. Later writers have estimated the number of participants to be as high as fifteen thousand. Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 68; Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three*

Throughout their report, the city council committee thought it best to withhold the names of fire department personnel.⁴⁸³ Consequently, they noted only that the bell of the New South Church “was rung.”⁴⁸⁴ Newspaper accounts claimed that Engine Company No. 20 had “sent a man” to ring the bell.⁴⁸⁵ Whoever rang the bell, how he gained access is an interesting question, because in 1837 the belfries of Boston churches were officially kept under lock and key, an arrangement that had been in place for a decade. The belfries were first locked at the request of the fire department’s chief engineer, following a series of false alarms in the city’s North End. But finding a solution that forestalled false alarms, while still allowing bells to be rung for fires, required a period of trial and error. Initially, churches agreed to install “good and substantial” locks and to secure their doors during the daytime. The proprietor of a nearby store was entrusted with a key and tasked with unlocking the door each night after curfew (to allow access for nighttime alarms) and locking the door the next morning.⁴⁸⁶ A year later, however, the chief engineer complained to the city council that insufficient access to church belfries was impeding nighttime alarms.⁴⁸⁷ This time, the city supplied the locks and distributed keys to each watch house, for watchmen to carry on their beats. In the event of a nighttime fire, a watchman was to begin ringing the nearest bell himself. A citizen living near the church

Centuries of Social Violence (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 120-34.

483. The committee reasoned that the interviews they conducted were not under oath, and worried that their report might nonetheless “appear in the records of the courts.” Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 15: 217.

484. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 15: 213.

485. “Riot in Boston,” *Newport Rhode-Island American*, 14 June 1837, [2] (reprinted from *Boston Post*, 12 June 1837); “Grand Row in Boston—Sunday, June 11,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 22 June 1837, 2.

486. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 4: 37-38.

487. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 5: 355-56.

was designated to leave his bed upon hearing the alarm and take over ringing so the watchman could respond to the fire.⁴⁸⁸ This was the system that the unnamed emissary (almost certainly belonging to or dispatched by Engine Company No. 20) circumvented on the afternoon of June 11, 1837, to make the bell of the New South Church ring “as for fire” when no fire burned. Perhaps the door was unlocked on a Sunday afternoon, perhaps the emissary misrepresented his intent, or perhaps no misrepresentation was needed. However the bell came to sound the alarm, the mayor did not trust the existing arrangement to effectively bar access to belfries on the evening after the riot. He placed a guard at every church with a bell.⁴⁸⁹

The fire bell’s relationship to the multitude—as members of the audience and as potential message producers—weighed on the minds of public officials and concerned citizens. As cities entrusted firefighting labor to specialized forces, the alarm’s intended recipients dwindled in relation to a general audience that was increasingly unknowable. Because bells invariably addressed all listeners within earshot, malevolent persons could respond along with the sympathetic and industrious. Each alarm presented an opportunity for illicit activity, and as cities grew these opportunities presented more frequently. Authorities also worried about the multitude initiating fire alarms. The challenge of safeguarding bell ropes from impetuous and idle hands—while simultaneously granting access to dependable, judicious, authorized custodians—persisted through numerous configurations of firefighting labor and the alarm system. The very capacity that made

488. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 5: 374.

489. Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 1: 199; “From the Atlas,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, 17 June 1837, [2].

bells so useful for mobilizing firefighters—the ability to instantaneously alert a large and scattered audience—could be appropriated for other ends.

From Here to There

Fire alarm systems—defined here as the people, practices, and technologies that (1) communicated awareness of a fire’s existence and (2) directed firefighters and resources to the fire’s location—evolved in response to many of the same pressures of urbanization that motivated cities to reorganize firefighting labor.⁴⁹⁰ As populations rose and cities’ built environments grew up and out to accommodate the demand, the rate of fires and alarms increased dramatically. Boston firefighters, for example, responded to 16 fires in 1801, when the city’s population was 25,000, and 99 fires in 1837, when the population was 93,000.⁴⁹¹ As the specialized services of firefighters were called upon more frequently, so were the services of bell ringers. Ensuring that an authorized person could (and would) sound the alarm speedily—and without granting access to the multitude—was a recurring challenge in all three cities. The other great challenge was making the fire bell indicate the location of a fire more precisely. Even in small communities, fires could be difficult to locate, but narrow, crowded streets increasingly hampered the response of urban firefighters.

Initiating the Alarm

490. Tarr, “The Municipal Telegraph Network.”

491. *Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department, 1838* (Boston, MA: John H. Eastburn, 1838), 24-33; Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 1: 109; Gibson, “Population of the 100 Largest Cities,” Tables 3 and 7. To put these numbers in perspective, if the rate of fires in relation to population had remained constant, the number of fires in 1837 would have been roughly 60.

Although bells were certainly the most obtrusive participants in fire alarms, they usually amplified a message that originated with a cry of fire or the clattering of a watchman's rattle.⁴⁹² Initially equipped with small handbells, watchmen (referred to in some early ordinances as "bell men") patrolled cities at night to suppress "disorders" and "irregularities," periodically announce the time and current weather conditions, and look out for danger—especially for signs of fire.⁴⁹³ As fires occurred more frequently, cities amended the duties of watchmen to ensure that church bells took up the alarm. This happened first in New York. In May 1817, a revision to the city's fire prevention ordinance added bell ringers, including church sextons, to a list of personnel whose names and addresses were distributed annually to the city's watch houses.⁴⁹⁴ When a fire broke out at night, watchmen were to consult the list and rouse bell ringers from their beds.⁴⁹⁵

This encouragement was necessary, because, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, bell ringers were less willing to render their services for free. Although the upswing in urban fires undoubtedly served as a contributing factor, bell ringers in smaller communities expressed the same disinclination to ring for free as their

492. The rattles carried by watchmen were wooden ratchet devices, which made a loud clatter when the teeth of a cog wheel repeatedly engaged a clapper. They were sounded by grasping the devices's handle and performing a whirling motion. To hear one in action, conduct a video search for "football rattle" or visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovJOpGU1pOM>.

493. *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, 1: 581; *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, 2: 115, 118, 7: 108, 136; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776*, 2: 20.

494. Prior to May 1817, when bell ringers were added, the list included common council members, fire wardens, and engineers. See *Law for Preventing and Extinguishing Fires, and to Regulate the Keeping and Transportation of Gun-Powder, in the City of New-York. Passed 10th November, 1806* (New York, 1806), 10.

495. *Laws and Ordinances...May 5, 1817*, 77.

counterparts in populous cities. The sexton of a Salem, Massachusetts, congregation, after neglecting to ring for a December 1815 fire, informed a selectman of that town that he had “no thought of ringing an alarm bell without special pay.”⁴⁹⁶ Bell ringing was never lucrative work, and sextons sometimes found themselves ringing the church’s bell at the local government’s request, with neither party eager to pay. Perhaps sextons observed that watchmen and volunteer fire department appointees received compensation for their exertions, and bell ringers thought their own time and labor to protect the community from fire should also be rewarded.

In April 1818, within a year of the city inspector collecting their addresses for the watch house list, New York sextons petitioned the Common Council for compensation. The council promptly delegated this request to the Finance Committee for extended consideration.⁴⁹⁷ In mid-August, though, an assistant alderman from Ward 3 requested an inquiry into “the obligation of the Sextons of the different churches to ring the Bells of the same on the alarm of fire,” and the council formed a special committee to investigate.⁴⁹⁸ Here it should be noted that, at this time, representatives from the southernmost wards (including Ward 3) were especially anxious to have church bells ring for fires, reliably and with all haste. Their interest had to do with the distribution of alarm bells on the island. In addition to church bells, the bells of City Hall, the jail, and one

496. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D.* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1914), 4: 367.

497. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 9: 585.

498. The council ordered a bell for the Chatham Street watch house in 1797, and installed (and removed and relocated) bells at seven markets before August 1818. See *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 2: 329, 410; 3: 188, 288, 667; 4: 653; 6: 170, 300; 8: 621, 753; 10: 533; 11: 53.

watch house all rang for fires, and watchmen could access smaller bells at five markets.⁴⁹⁹

In all but one case, however, the market bells were located along the banks of either the East or the North (Hudson) River, leaving the wards below City Hall to rely primarily on church bells. (Figure 4.4.) Consequently, when an August 19 fire—for which some church bells did not ring and some fire companies did not respond—destroyed a handful of shops and tenement buildings in the impoverished Ward 6, the newly created special committee (predominated by Ward 3 aldermen) launched a thorough investigation.⁵⁰⁰ They met with representatives from nine congregations (seven of which hailed from the lower wards) and extracted assurances that the sextons employed by these churches were required, either expressly or implicitly, to ring for fires and would do so in the future.⁵⁰¹

When the Common Council revisited the issue of neglected alarm ringing seven years later, ministers and church wardens were not so amenable.⁵⁰² Relations took a hostile turn in May 1825, after complaints about the duration of ringing for Sunday

499. The council ordered a bell for the Chatham Street watch house in 1797, and installed (and removed and relocated) bells at seven markets before August 1818. See *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 2: 329, 410; 3: 188, 288, 667; 4: 653; 6: 170, 300; 8: 621, 753; 10: 533; 11: 53.

500. “Fire,” *New York Evening Post*, 20 August 1818, [2]; “Fire,” *New York Columbian*, 20 August, 1919, [2]; “A publication has been made in some of the papers setting forth that Mr. Jacob Sarner was the only sufferer at the fire...” *New York Evening Post*, 21 August 1818, [2]; “Fire,” *New York National Advocate*, 21 August 1818, [2]; “Fire,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 21 August 1818, [2]; “Fire,” *New York Spectator*, 21 August 1818, [3]. The fire began in the densely populated sixth ward, roughly one block from the notorious Five Points intersection. Although the fire was devastating for its victims, it was not on the scale of other fires that special committees investigated. Local newspapers mentioned the fire in passing, but did not address any problems with the alarm or the response of fire companies.

501. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 9: 774-75.

502. The issue of neglected alarm ringing surfaced periodically between August 1818 and May 1825. In December 1818, a fire consumed half-a-dozen houses in Ward 3, after church bells failed to ring and fire companies were slow to arrive. That same month, the Common Council assigned a committee to investigate licensing bell ringers. Church bells failed to ring again in June 1820, this time for a fire at the boundary of Wards 5 and 6. On both occasions, the editor of the *New York Evening Post* scolded bell ringers, and in June 1820 he called for the council to intervene. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 10: 174; “Fire,” *New York Evening Post*, 1 December 1818, [2]; “Thursday, June 22,” *New York Evening Post*, 22 June 1820, [2].

services prompted the Committee on Public Offices to look into “the expediency of regulating the time and manner of ringing the Church and other Bells in this City.”⁵⁰³ The significance of this debate to the churchgoing bell’s departure from American communities is addressed in the following chapter. It pertains to the fire bell because of how the officers of several churches responded to the perceived threat: they let it be known that if the council interfered with ringing on Sundays, the churches would give their sextons “positive orders not to touch the bells for fire, or any other public occasion.”⁵⁰⁴ Neither side took further action until December, when many church bells failed to ring for an early morning fire that burned for almost an hour before firefighters were able to begin battling it effectively, leaving nearly one hundred families homeless.⁵⁰⁵ Newspaper coverage blamed the delay partly on a scarcity of fire plugs, which the heroes of the story (the city’s “active, resolute and indefatigable firemen”) overcame by configuring their engines and hose to convey water from the river.⁵⁰⁶ Sextons and, by extension, the churches and city council, were cast in a less favorable light for having let their differences interfere with public safety. After chiding bell ringers for refusing to “budge an inch” on the matter of compensation, William Coleman of the *New York*

503. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 14: 550.

504. “Communication,” *New York Spectator*, 31 May 1825.

505. “From the New-York Gazette of Friday. FIRE,” *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 19 December 1825, [2].

506. “Destructive and Distressing Fire,” *New York Evening Post*, 15 December 1825, [2]. See also “From the New-York Gazette of Friday. Fire,” *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 19 December 1825, [2]; “Fire in New York,” *Portland Eastern Argus*, 20 December 1825, [2]; “Great Fire in New York,” *Stockbridge Berkshire Star*, 22 December 1825, [3].

Evening Post issued an exasperated plea: “[F]or God's sake, let not the city be burnt down about our ears while the parties are settling the dispute.”⁵⁰⁷

At their next meeting, the Common Council ordered the fire department’s chief engineer to investigate why the bells were not ringing for fires.⁵⁰⁸ He returned later the same week to lay blame squarely on the shoulders of the sextons, who, he reported, had “entered into an association” to not ring for fires unless they were paid twenty-five dollars annually.⁵⁰⁹ An assistant alderman from Ward 1, however, suspected that more remained to be discovered. How extensive was the conspiracy? Had church officers known about their sextons’ agreement?⁵¹⁰ While the Fire Department Committee pursued these questions further, citizens tendered their own thoughts—on sextons, the fire bell, and problems with the larger fire alarm system—to newspapers. An incensed contributor to the *New York American* asserted that bell ringing in general annoyed many of the city’s inhabitants. Since sextons intended to extort payment for ringing the bells during fire alarms (“the only part of it which is useful”), why not cut churches, sextons, and bells out of the loop entirely, prohibit *all* ringing, and summon firefighters with Chinese gongs?⁵¹¹ A subsequent writer, “Civis,” firmly rejected the idea of gongs, although he agreed that the city’s bells rang too often and for too many different purposes. “*Ring the bells*,” he urged, and pay the sextons—“it being no trifling thing to get up in a cold night,

507. “Destructive and Distressing Fire,” *New York Evening Post*, 15 December 1825, [2].

508. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 15: 103.

509. *Ibid.*, 119.

510. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 15: 124; “Proceedings of the Common Council,” *New York Spectator*, 30 December 1825.

511. To the Editors of the *American*, “*New York American*,” December 26, 1825, [2].

and clamber a steeple, or to leave their work in the day time and do it.”⁵¹² But, Civis continued, ringing on weekdays and evenings for all other purposes should cease. “[T]he difficulty,” he argued, “is not so much *that the bells are not rung* [...] as that they do not *serve the purpose of an alarm*, from their being rung so frequently at all hours of the day and evening.”⁵¹³

The Fire Department Committee never reported on church wardens’ possible knowledge of the sextons’ agreement, and the city council continued to periodically address the problem of church bells failing to ring for fire alarms.⁵¹⁴ They complained to church wardens, and they ordered watch captains (and, later, the fire department’s chief engineer) to report negligent ringers, but they never compensated sextons for ringing church bells.⁵¹⁵ The council did, however, eventually pay civic bell ringers for sounding fire alarms. Over the next quarter century, the city gradually reconfigured its fire alarm system to depend less on church bells and sextons. The council installed bells at additional markets and watch houses, provided fire companies with alarm bells near or on their engine houses, and finally constructed towers at points throughout the city to elevate both watchmen and bells. By 1853, rotating crews of salaried bell ringers/lookouts

512. Civis, "To the Editors of the New-York American," *New York American*, December 28, 1825, [2], emphasis in original.

513. *Ibid.*, [2].

514. The Fire Department did contact churches regarding ringing for fires. St. George Episcopal received a letter on March 9, 1826. In reply the vestry called attention to the church’s ninth by-law, which ordered the sexton to ring for fires. Henry Anstice, *History of Saint George’s Church in the City of New York, 1752-1811-1911* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911), 106.

515. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 15: 383, 17: 52; *A Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York; Also of the Ordinances, Resolutions and Orders Established by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonality of the City of New York, in Common Council Convened, Relating to the Fire Department of the City of New York, from 1812 to 1855* (New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1855), 205, 226, 249, 275. The last ordinance directing the chief engineer to report negligent church bell ringers was passed in April 1839.

occupied eight such towers around the clock, sounding alarms on bells reserved exclusively for that purpose.⁵¹⁶ Setting apart these bells solely for fire alarms addressed the problem of discernibility, raised by Civis decades earlier. The bells' enormity addressed the same issue: most of the lookout tower bells weighed at least eight thousand pounds, and the bell in the cupola of City Hall weighed more than twenty-one thousand pounds.⁵¹⁷ Tower bells throughout New York sounded often—on weekdays, weekends, at all hours, and for many purposes—but firefighters could differentiate the fire bell from the churchgoing bell, because the former was executed on larger, lower-pitched bells.

Directing Responders

By the time salaried bell ringers enjoyed continuous and exclusive access to New York's enormous alarm bells, firefighters (and, of course, the multitude) could distinguish the fire bell from the churchgoing bell by the method of sounding, as well as by pitch. Rather than ringing vigorously for responders to "come here," the city's bell ringers used a tolling hammer to execute discrete numerical signals, which corresponded to geographic districts.⁵¹⁸ By the code established in 1851, for example, two strokes on

516. *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York* (New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1853), 118; *Proceedings of the Board of Assistants* (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1851), 34: 341-44. See also *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 328, 329-30, 358.

517. Newspaper notices when this bell was installed gave a weight of 21,123 pounds (minus the 600-lb clapper). To put this poundage in perspective, the alarm bell on New York's City Hall could have eaten ten Liberty Bells for breakfast. "City Hall Fire Bell," *New York Evangelist*, 1 December 1853, 191; "Various Items," *Pittsfield Sun*, 8 December 1853, [3]. For the weight of several lookout tower bells ordered near this time, see *Proceedings of the Board of Assistants*, 34: 15, 24, 54, 294, 302; *Proceedings of the Board of Councilmen of the City of New York* (New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1855), 59: 402-03, 428, 740-41.

518. Tolling hammers were devices that allowed a ringer to strike a bell remotely by pushing a lever. New York's fire chief, Alfred Carson, patented a design for a tolling hammer in 1853. The Jones Foundry of Troy, New York, advertised tolling hammers made with Carson's design alongside their fire

one of eight district alarm bells meant that a fire burned somewhere north of Twenty-Second Street and west of Sixth Avenue.⁵¹⁹ A large area remained for responders to search, but knowing the general direction of the fire allowed companies to pull their apparatus toward the action while pursuing specific coordinates along the way.

This system of signaling a fire's general location with an audible code took decades to implement, but the *idea* of having the fire bell direct responders occurred to inventive New Yorkers in the late eighteenth century. In a March 1795 missive to the *New York Diary*, a contributor identified as "Public Good" lamented inhabitants' logistical floundering during alarms: "[W]hen the bells are rung for fire, as no body can tell where it is, all resort to the city hall."⁵²⁰ This habitual convergence toward the center of town wasted precious minutes, because "many may have come from the very neighbourhood of it."⁵²¹ Instead of all the bells ringing haphazardly, Public Good suggested, the bell nearest the fire should "ring without intermission, while all the rest ring in peals of three four or five minutes, with an interval of the same space of time." For good measure, he added, "the bells next to the fire might also ring somewhat quicker than the common mode."⁵²² Theoretically, these differences in pace and timing may have guided some listeners toward the fire's location. In practice, the challenges of executing the plan (rousing sleepy bell ringers, getting them into belfries, and coordinating the

bells. *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1853. Part I. Arts and Manufactures* (Washington, DC: Beverley Tucker, 1854), 455; Catalog for Jones & Company, Bell Founders (Troy, NY: A. W. Scribner, circa 1866), 22.

519. See district codes taking effect January 1, 1851 in *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 321-24.

520. "For the New-York Diary," *Philadelphia Gazette*, 10 March 1795, [2].

521. *Ibid.*, [2].

522. *Ibid.*, [2].

performance across multiple towers) were formidable. Although the city council entertained similar proposals over the next four decades to make the fire bell indicate location, none of these schemes were implemented.⁵²³

For many years, the official responsibility of guiding New York firefighters fell entirely on watchmen, who were charged with “mentioning the street where [the fire] may be” in addition to their duties of rousing council members, engineers, and bell ringers from their beds.⁵²⁴ By May 1827, however, when Basil Hall awoke to the “hot haste” of a New York fire alarm, watchmen were dutifully rapping at doors and windows, but inhabitants were also following directions from above.⁵²⁵

On the top of the City Hall [...] a fire-warden or watchman is constantly stationed, whose duty when the alarm is given, is to hoist a lantern at the extremity of a long arm attached to the steeple, and to direct it towards the fire, as a sort of beacon, to instruct the engines what course to steer. There was something singularly striking in this contrivance, which looked as if a great giant, with a blood-red finger, had been posted in the midst of the city, to warn the citizens of their danger.⁵²⁶

The watchman who hoisted the lantern also rang the bell.⁵²⁷ Indicating the direction of nighttime fires in this manner from City Hall proved useful enough that, in 1833, the Board of Aldermen allocated funds for additional personnel to perform the same duty at a

523. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, 3: 623; 5: 465.

524. *A Law for Preventing and Extinguishing Fires*... 10 November, 1806, 10. Until the city disbanded its watch department, in 1844, watchmen faced fines and could even lose their jobs for failing to publicize a fire's location. See *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 225, 282, 357.

525. Basil Hall, *Travels in North America, in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1830), 1: 19.

526. *Ibid.*, 20.

527. *Proceedings of the Board of Assistant Aldermen* (New York, 1835), 3: 262; *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 225, 248, 274.

new watch house on the Lower East Side.⁵²⁸ Decades later, after New York had instituted its professional fire department, former volunteers recalled “the pointer” fondly, although a remark by a retired engine company foreman—that “we never knew where the fire was till we got to the City Hall, where the ‘pointer’ was”—raises questions about the readability of the giant’s blood-red finger from below Wall Street.⁵²⁹

It was in Philadelphia, not New York, that the fire bell first told responders to go in a particular direction. The city implemented an auditory alarm code in 1828, to coincide with the installation of a four-thousand-pound bell in the newly restored steeple of the Pennsylvania State House, now Independence Hall.⁵³⁰ (The old bell, which retired to the lower steeple and performed in a ceremonial capacity until 1846, was just beginning to enjoy a reputation for having proclaimed “liberty throughout all the land” on July 4, 1776.)⁵³¹ The new State House bell, cast by John Wilbank of Germantown, was twice the weight of its predecessor (or any other bell in Philadelphia), and its prodigious size swayed the Philadelphia City Council’s decision to select William Strickland’s steeple restoration plan. A contingent of council members, intent on restoring the

528. *Proceedings of the Board of Assistants* (New York, 1837), 2: 211-12, 264. See also Costello, *Our Firemen*, 424.

529. Costello, *Our Firemen*, 422-424 (424, quotation). Abraham B. Purdy served as the foreman of Engine No. 11, which housed their engine near the present-day intersection of Old Slip and Water Streets.

530. The new bell was cast by John Wilbank twice (after the sound of the first casting proved unsatisfactory) and was finally settled in the steeple in December 1828. It was replaced in the Independence Hall steeple in 1876 by the Centennial Bell (currently in the steeple). For more on the Wilbank bell, see Arthur H. Frazier, “The Stretch Clock and Its Bell at the State House,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 98, no. 3 (1974): 287–313; “Proceedings of Councils,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, 8 March 1828, 152-54; “State House Bell,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, 13 September 1828, 144; “State House Bell,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, 13 September 1828, 144; “State-House Fire Bell,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, 13 December 1828, 351.

531. For more on the Liberty Bell and its collective memory, see Deborah Lubken and Debora Lui, “If Freedom Didn’t Ring: Interpreting a Quiet Moment in the Liberty Bell’s Past,” presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, May 2014, Seattle.

“hallowed” site of the Declaration signing to its original state, initially insisted on a wooden steeple. They came to see the merits of Strickland’s sturdier, partial-brick design after conceding that an entirely wooden structure would not accommodate a bell of the size they wished to order, and a large bell was required for desired changes to the city’s fire alarm system.⁵³² Elevated above the rooftops in the new State House steeple, watchmen would have a better vantage point from which to spot fires, and the distinguishable tone of a weightier bell would facilitate “giving the alarm in a much more effectual manner than at present.”⁵³³ In December 1828, the newly installed Wilbank bell began sounding for fire alarms, following a numerical code printed in Philadelphia newspapers. (Figure 4.5). A series of quick strokes, executed with a tolling hammer, indicated the fire’s general location from the State House: one stroke for north, two for south, three for east, and four for west. Intermediate directions (e.g., north-east) were indicated by sounding two codes consecutively, separated by a short pause. If the fire’s location was unknown to the bell ringer, he struck the bell “five or more times in rapid succession.”⁵³⁴

The *Monthly Review* of London hailed Philadelphia’s coded alarm system as “ingenious” enough to merit imitation, even if that meant “borrowing a good idea from the Yankees,” but the system’s success was somewhat dependent on the distribution of

532. “Proceedings of Councils,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, 8 March 1828, 152-54 (quotation: 154). See also Alexix McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 38.

533. *Ibid.*, 153

534. “State House Bell,” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*, December 1828, 351.

Philadelphia's population across its geography.⁵³⁵ In 1828, the State House was situated near the center of the city's population, and the built environment was only beginning to extend toward the Schuylkill River from the banks of the Delaware. A system that oriented listeners around a central reference point was less feasible for the elongated island of Manhattan. By 1835, New York's watchmen were striking out audible alarm codes similar to those used in Philadelphia, but these signals dispatched firefighters to discrete districts rather than indicating a general direction.⁵³⁶ (Figure 4.5.) Geography influenced the adoption of directional versus district alarm systems by other communities in similar ways: Baltimore's codes, like Philadelphia's, oriented listeners by compass coordinates, while Chicago, Memphis, and New Orleans codes sent responders to discrete and designated areas of the city.⁵³⁷ Even as Philadelphia's population inched westward, the State House bell persisted as the alarm system's nucleus. For a brief period in the mid-1840s, the city attempted to distribute the alarm by having watch captains at four district station houses ring for fires occurring in their respective districts. The intent was

535. "Ingenious Fire Alarm," *London Monthly Review*, August 1833, 590.

536. New York's fire ordinance reflects no official changes in the system of ringing bells for fire alarms until April 1835. "The Fireman's Guide," a map published by Prosper Desobry, shows the city's fire limits as of August 1, 1834, and also displays the alarm codes for each district. The publication date of this map is widely cited as 1834, but it could have been published any time after August 1, 1834. "The Firemen's Guide: A Map of the City of New-York, Showing the Fire Districts, Fire Limits, Hydrants, Public Cisterns, Stations of Engines, Hooks & Ladders, Hose Carts, & c. (New York: P. Desobry, c. 1834). Maps of New York City and State. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed 30 August 2014: <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-e52f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> ' *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 225.

537. *Digest of the Charters and Ordinances of the City of Memphis, from 1826 to 1860*, ed. Smith P. Bankhead (Memphis, TN: Saunders, Oberly & Jones, 1860), 219-21; Thomas O'Connor, *History of the Fire Department of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1895), 44; Herman A. Dick, *From Church Bells to Electric Signals: A Story of the Chicago Fire Alarm System* (Chicago: Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration, 1940), 3; Clarence H. Forrest, *Official History of the Fire Department of the City of Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD, 1898), 188-89.

to have a bell near the fire summon responders to “come here.”⁵³⁸ Less than a year later, though, the City Council revised the ordinance to have the station house bells ring “in all respects in the same manner as the great Bell upon the State House” to indicate “the position or direction of the fire *from the said State House*.”⁵³⁹

Definite, Instantaneous, and Universal Alarm

While New York and Philadelphia experimented with directional and district systems, Boston’s bells continued to invite responders to “come here,” despite reforms proposed, from time to time, by fire department personnel and innovative citizens. George Darracott, the engineer who in 1825 scouted firefighting methods and equipment for Mayor Josiah Quincy III, recommended having “the bell nearest the fire continue ringing while the other bells toll quickly.”⁵⁴⁰ It was Mayor Josiah Quincy, Jr. (son of Mayor Josiah Quincy III) who finally initiated substantial changes to Boston’s alarm system. In his 1848 annual address to the city council, Quincy announced an intent to “signalize” Boston’s engine houses and tower bells using the principles of magnetic telegraphy.⁵⁴¹ The cost would be “very trifling” and well worth the expense, he assured

538. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, for 1843-44* (Philadelphia, 1844), 154, App. LXII, 158.

539. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, for 1845-46* (Philadelphia, 1844), App. XLI, 138 (emphasis in original).

540. “Boston, June 1, 1825,” *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 30 June 1825, [1].

541. Josiah Quincy, “Address of the Mayor to the City Council of Boston, January 3, 1848,” *DCB*, no. 16, (1848), 9. The plan Quincy presented in January 1848 was conceived by F. O. J. Smith, superintendent of the New York and Boston Telegraph, who later abandoned the project. See deposition of Moses Farmer in *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office: Application for an Extension of Letters Patent No. 17, 355. Granted to William F. Channing and Moses G. Farmer. May 19th, 1857* (New York: Kilbourne Tompkins, 1871), 212-13. For more on the advent of fire telegraphy in Boston see Adam Bosch, “Historical Sketch of the Fire Alarm Telegraph,” *Transactions of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers* 14 (1897): 336-37; Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 2: 692-97; Gilmore Cooke, “The Fire Alarm Telegraph System of Boston: Its Origin, Development and

council members, because this application of the telegraph would allow the fire department to address its most troubling source of inefficiency.⁵⁴² Almost forty-five percent of the previous year's alarms had been false, Quincy reported, and engines had been used to extinguish the fire on only two-thirds of the legitimate calls. Yet each time the bells had rung, firefighters all over the city had dropped their regular work to drag engines and hose wagons through the streets. Enabling telegraphic communication between scattered engine houses, Quincy anticipated, would empower the chief engineer to dispatch labor and resources efficiently, "by the tap of a finger," and the same technology could be used to sound the alarm simultaneously on all the city's bells.⁵⁴³

Over the following year, a special committee (chaired by Quincy himself) enlisted the expertise of F. O. J. Smith, then superintendent of the New York and Boston Telegraph, and made some progress toward realizing the plan to connect Boston's bells and engine houses.⁵⁴⁴ At the end of December 1848, just before Quincy retired from office, the committee tested a striking apparatus by arranging for a telegraph operator in New York to simultaneously strike two small bells (weighing approximately 150 pounds

Contributions, 1845 to present," paper presented at the Annual Conference on New England Industrial Archeology, Plymouth, NH, February 2004; Gilmore Cooke, "Certainty of Operations: The Origins of Reliability Engineering in Boston's Fire Alarm and Transit Systems," paper presented for Boston's Reliability Chapter of the IEEE, Boston, MA, May 2013; Tarr, "Municipal Telegraph Network;" William Werner, *History of the Divisions and Districts of the Boston Fire Department* (Boston, MA: Boston Sparks Association, 1974).

542. Quincy, "Address of the Mayor to the City Council of Boston, January 3, 1848," 9.

543. *Ibid.*, 10.

544. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1848, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 26: 77, 268-69, 561.

each) in Boston.⁵⁴⁵ Ironically, the coincidence of this successful experiment with an actual fire alarm gave birth to a rumor that the committee had perpetrated a false alarm. Newspapers reported that the New York operator had remotely struck the bell of Boston's City Hall (as opposed to the two small bells arranged for the experiment), and that "persons ignorant of what was going on" had taken up the alarm on other bells, causing the "the whole fire department" to turn out.⁵⁴⁶

The project to connect Boston's engine houses stalled under the next mayor's administration until February 1851, when the city council once again turned their attention to improving the fire alarm system.⁵⁴⁷ The following month, William F. Channing submitted a formal proposal for a "system of telegraphic fire alarms" that, he assured the council, would enable the "definite, instantaneous and universal communication" of alarm.⁵⁴⁸ Channing had been trying to raise public interest in fire telegraphy for years—since sending a letter to the editor of the *Boston Daily Advertiser* in June 1845. In that letter, he had lamented Boston's failure to follow the example of other

545. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1848, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 26: 561. The striking apparatus tested on this occasion was built by Moses Farmer at the request of F. O. J. Smith. See *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 213, 234.

546. "New and Wonderful Application of the Magnetic Telegraph.—A Bell actually Rung in Boston by a man in New York!" *Christian Inquirer*, 30 December 1848, 47, reprinted from the *Boston Traveller*. Newspaper accounts like the one above reported that (1) the New York telegraph operator struck the bell of Boston's City Hall, (2) the fire department turned out, and (3) a real fire then made use of their services. Moses Farmer, who constructed the striking mechanism at the center of the experiment, explained in an 1871 deposition that the two small bells, rather than the bell of Boston's City Hall were struck by the telegraph operator in New York. See *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 234.

547. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1851, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 29: 65.

548. William F. Channing, "Communication from Dr. Wm. F. Channing Respecting a System of Fire Alarms," *DCB*, 1, no. 20, (1851), 5. Channing's original communication to the Board of Aldermen, including his original maps and diagrams, are available at the City of Boston Archives. William F. Channing, "Communication from Dr. Wm F. Channing, respecting a System of Fire Alarms, March 24, 1851," Boston City Council Proceedings, Board of Aldermen, Docket Documents.

cities in “maturing” its alarm system to indicate the direction of a fire.⁵⁴⁹ The plan Channing presented to the city council in March 1851 was comprehensive and specific: he had mapped out the entire system, calculated the cost of materials and labor for each mile of construction, given thought to contingencies, and even estimated the radius of audibility for each church or school bell currently rung for fires.⁵⁵⁰ What Channing imagined was much more than a means of sounding fire alarms on multiple bells and conveying messages between engine houses. Channing’s system was designed to keep the mechanism of alarm in trusted hands and to communicate the precise (definite) location of a fire at the speed of electricity (instantaneous) to the entire community (universal).⁵⁵¹

Within a matter of months, the city council appropriated funds for the project, and work began to implement Channing’s plan.⁵⁵² The city was divided into seven districts, which were connected to a central telegraph office by two types of circuits: (1) alarm

549. C., “Morse’s Telegraph for Fire Alarms,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 3 June, 1845, [2].

550. Channing, “Communication from Dr. Wm. F. Channing,” 9-29. Documentation included with Channing and Farmer’s 1871 application to extend their patent on the Fire Alarm Telegraph references a map, drawn by Channing, which he provided to Boston’s Joint Special Committee on Telegraphic Fire Alarms once construction was underway. The map depicted the estimated radius from which each potential alarm circuit bell could be distinctly heard. Sadly, I have not been able to locate either the original map or a reproduction. See *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 55.

551. Channing had mapped out the entire system, calculated the materials needed for construction (including the length of wire needed between each alarm station and signal box), estimated costs, and given thought to contingencies. See Channing, “Communication from Dr. Wm. F. Channing,” 9-29. Channing’s original communication to the Board of Aldermen, including his original maps and diagrams, are available at the City of Boston Archives. William F. Channing, “Communication from Dr. Wm F. Channing, respecting a System of Fire Alarms, March 24, 1851,” Boston City Council Proceedings, Board of Aldermen, Docket Documents.

552. For the system’s implementation, see Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1851, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 29: 293-96, 343, 556, 578; Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1852, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 30: 140, 145, 159; Joint Standing Committee on Public Buildings, “Report Concerning a Uniform System of Fire Alarms,” 5 June 1851, *DCB*, 1, no. 42, (1851); Joint Special Committee on Telegraphic Fire Alarms, “Report on Telegraphic Fire Alarms,” 22 December 1851, *DCB*, 2, no. 74, (1851).

circuits, comprised of church and school bells, and (2) signal circuits, comprised of locked, cast-iron signal boxes, which were mounted at regular intervals on buildings and poles throughout the city.⁵⁵³ Moses G. Farmer, who served as Superintendent of Construction and designed the apparatus for striking the bells, reported full cooperation from the churches whose bells were incorporated into the system.⁵⁵⁴ Tailoring the striking apparatus to bells of dramatically different weights (ranging from 300 to 3,700 pounds) and configuring all bells on the alarm circuit to strike in unison, however, proved so difficult that it delayed the system's launch.⁵⁵⁵ When the fire telegraph began operating on April 28, 1852, the process of communicating an alarm of fire, from initiation through interpretation, was intended to work accordingly. (Refer to Figure 4.6).⁵⁵⁶

The citizen

Upon discovering a fire (A), a citizen would locate the nearest signal box (B) and read instructions to learn who, in the vicinity, was entrusted with a key (C). In addition to a business owner or resident in close proximity to each box, keys were distributed to police officers and fire department engineers.

553. Here, I am primarily concerned with the communication of alarm over Channing and Farmer's system. A digital reproduction of the circuitry map that Channing submitted with his March 1851 proposal to the Boston City Council was produced by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) in 2004, in conjunction with that organization awarding Electrical Milestone Status to Channing and Farmer's innovation. Contact the IEEE for more information.

554. Joint Special Committee on Telegraphic Fire Alarms, "Report on Telegraphic Fire Alarms," 22 December 1851, *DCB*, 2, no. 74, (1851), 10.

555. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1852, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 30: 159. See *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 172-73, 214; William F. Channing, "On the Municipal Electric Telegraph; Especially in Its Application to Fire Alarms," *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 13, no. 37 (1852), 77.

556. Figure 4.6 is an interaction diagram compiled from the December 22, 1851, report of the Joint Committee on Telegraphic Fire Alarms, especially the revisions to Channing's original plan detailed in the Appendix by Moses Farmer. Joint Special Committee on Telegraphic Fire Alarms, "Report on Telegraphic Fire Alarms," 22 December 1851, *DCB*, 2, no. 74, (1851). The associated map is based on George Girdler Smith's 1851 Plan of Boston, Comprising a Part of Charlestown and Cambridge, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Digital Collection, Boston Public Library. <http://maps.bpl.org/id/10962>.

The key keeper

Having been alerted to the fire, the key keeper (C) would unlock the signal box (B) and register the alarm by turning a crank.⁵⁵⁷ The key keeper would then wait for a reply from the central office (D).

The central operator

The operator at the central office (D) would:

7. listen to the incoming signal to learn the fire's location,
8. verify reception of the alarm by striking the district number on the signal box (B) for the key keeper to hear,
9. depress a key to activate the alarm circuit (causing the bells to simultaneously strike thirty to forty blows, pause, and then strike the district number corresponding to the fire's location), and
10. depress a key to activate the signal circuit (causing signal boxes throughout the system to strike the number of the box from which the alarm originated).

Firefighters

Volunteer firefighters, going about their usual activities throughout the city (E) would:

1. listen to the bells to learn the district in which the fire was located,
2. Listen to the tapping of a nearby signal box to learn the number of the box from which the signal originated, and
3. consult a special map to decode the location of the fire and respond with their respective engine companies (F).

⁵⁵⁷. Vocabulary for initiating an alarm on a signal box evolved with the technology. Initially, the user would "turn in" the alarm manually by cranking a handle. The cranking had to be performed clockwise and at a steady pace that was not too fast or too slow. After the introduction of automatic signal boxes in the 1860s (which turned the break wheel once a user pulled a hook or lever) the signal box operator would "pull in" the alarm.

In short, the communication of an alarm over Boston's new fire telegraph system depended on a number of actors, both human and machine, successfully performing their choreographed parts in a multi-stage production. If everyone and everything worked according to plan, the system promised to substantially reduce the time needed to alert firefighters and guide them to the place where their services were needed.

Before the new system went into operation, Channing was optimistic about the usability of signal box mechanisms, insisting that "a child of six years old could not fail to give a correct signal."⁵⁵⁸ Adults, as it happened, found cranking to be a temperamental undertaking.⁵⁵⁹ Instructions to key keepers, circulated the week preceding the system's launch, foreshadowed complications with initiating the alarm. Key keepers should first "turn the crank within the box, say ten times, not too fast," and wait for a response from the central operator.⁵⁶⁰ If the box remained silent, the keeper should "turn the crank again, more slowly."⁵⁶¹ If that failed, the keeper should attempt to turn in the alarm at a different box and, if *that* failed, he should report the alarm in person at the central office.⁵⁶² A journal kept by telegraph operators during the system's initial months of operation shows that, for the very first alarm, one J. H. Goodale "turn[ed] the crank like lightning, so it could not be read" and resorted to in-person delivery.⁵⁶³ The same alarm disabled the

558. *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office*, 60.

559. For explanations of the ways cranking could go awry, see U.S. Congress, House, *Fire Alarm Telegraph. Letter from the Secretary of War, Relative to House Bill No. 1574, to aid in the construction of a fire-alarm telegraph in the District of Columbia*, 43rd Cong., 1st sess., 1874, Ex. Doc. 190, 2; Werner, *History of the Divisions and Districts*, 184-85.

560. "City of Boston," *Boston Daily Atlas*, 27 April 1852, [2].

561. *Ibid.*, [2].

562. *Ibid.*

563. *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 218. No J. H. Goodale's are listed in the 1852 *Boston Directory*, but a John W. Goodale resided at 3 Noyes Place, near the location of District 1, signal box 7, where the first alarm originated.

striking mechanisms on four bells.⁵⁶⁴ In fact, the first few months of operation were plagued by mechanical failure and user error.⁵⁶⁵ During this time the city council also fielded petitions, from fire department personnel and others, to revise the code for signaling a fire's location and to alter the bells included in the alarm circuits.⁵⁶⁶ By July 1852, however, mechanical breakdowns were happening less frequently, and an editorial in the *Boston Daily Atlas* remarked hopefully that the fire telegraph "[bid] fair to relieve the firemen of false alarms altogether."⁵⁶⁷ This perceived drop in false alarms was borne out in subsequent annual reports of the fire department. In 1851, the year preceding the fire telegraph's introduction, false alarms numbered sixty-five; in 1853, when the fire telegraph had been operating for a year, false alarms numbered ten; in 1854, twelve; in 1855, fourteen.⁵⁶⁸

In 1854, Channing and Farmer applied together for a patent and began marketing their innovation as the American Fire Alarm Telegraph.⁵⁶⁹ In promotional materials, the system they singled out for unfavorable comparison with their own was the arrangement

564. *Ibid.*, 219.

565. *Ibid.*, 176-78, 218-23, 226-30.

566. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1852, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 30: 479, 615, 650-52, 682, 709-10..

567. "The Fire Department," *Boston Daily Atlas*, 1 July 1852, [2].

568. Boston Fire Department "Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department for the year 1851," 15 September 1851, *DCB*, 2, no. 53, (1851), 3; Boston Fire Department "Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department for the year 1851," 15 September 1851, *DCB*, 2, no. 53, (1851), 3; Boston Fire Department, "Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department for the year 1853," 15 September 1853, *DCB*, 2, no. 61, (1853), 3; Boston Fire Department, "Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department for the year 1854," 1 September 1854, *DCB*, 2, no. 65, (1854), 3; Boston Fire Department, "Annual Report of the Boston Fire Department for the year 1855," 1 September 1855, *DCB*, 2, no. 50, (1855), 3.

569. Channing and Farmer waited two years before filing a patent application (on May 13, 1854). They began promoting their invention earlier. Farmer traveled to Philadelphia to generate interest in the system roughly one month into the telegraph's operation in Boston. *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 231; United States Patent Office, *Decisions of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1871* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872), 114-16.

then used in New York. At this time, the island of Manhattan was divided into eight fire districts, each with a watch tower housing a large alarm bell and a rotating crew of bell ringers, who kept a constant lookout for fires. Since the summer of 1851 (roughly a year before Boston launched its fire telegraph system), the occupants of New York's district towers had been able to communicate with each other over telegraph wires strung between towers.⁵⁷⁰ By 1854, this rudimentary network also included one fire house, the home of the chief engineer, and the bell of the Post Office on Nassau Street, in lower Manhattan.⁵⁷¹ Additionally, both the "fire telegraph" (linking bell towers) and a separate "police and fire" telegraph system (linking police stations to the offices of the mayor and chief of police) could be accessed at twenty-five police stations throughout the city. This enabled a police officer to spot a fire while on patrol and convey the alarm—on foot—to the nearest police station, where the information could then be telegraphed to the lookout tower of the corresponding district.⁵⁷² In Channing and Farmer's 1854 pamphlet, New York's fire telegraph (unsurprisingly) came up short in almost every comparison with the American Fire Alarm Telegraph. The latter system boasted a response time—from discovery of a fire to bells sounding the alarm—of one to three minutes. Its distributed

570. New York's Common Council approved a municipal telegraph system in November 1846 and granted Hugh Downing and Royal E. House to proceed with construction in December 1847. In January 1851, the remaining work was given to Richard H. Bull. *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 308-09, 325; *Proceedings of the Board of Assistants*, 30: 540, 550-51; Costello, *Our Firemen*, 111, 121-23; Sheldon, *Story of the Volunteer Fire Department*, 158.

571. At this time, no watchman was assigned to the post office belfry. Police officers and the fire insurance patrol could pull the bell rope (for a comparatively small bell of 1,500 pounds) to alert the department (by telegraph) to the existence of fires in lower Manhattan. See "Report of the Special Committee of the Select and Common Council in Relation to the Fire Alarm and Police Telegraph, Presented 12th October, 1854," App. 64, in *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning June 12, and Ending December 2, 1854* (Philadelphia: W. H. Sickels, 1854), 250.

572. "Report of the Special Committee of the Select and Common Council in Relation to the Fire Alarm and Police Telegraph," 250-52. For additional accounts of how the New York fire telegraph system worked in the 1850s, see *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office*, 113, 255-56.

signal box system directed fire companies to within 250 yards of their destination, rather than pointing them toward an area “a mile or two square.”⁵⁷³ Finally, the American Fire Alarm Telegraph dramatically reduced the personnel required to initiate alarms. Apart from the central operator, the entire system worked “without the intervention of hands, watchmen or bell-ringers at the belfries or bell-towers.”⁵⁷⁴

John H. Purdy and William J. Phillips of Philadelphia quoted the above claims liberally in a proposal they submitted to the Philadelphia City Council in October 1854, bidding to construct a system for that city modeled on Channing and Farmer’s plan.⁵⁷⁵ The special committee tasked with evaluating proposals was especially taken with Farmer’s “hydraulic striking apparatus,” which they anticipated would allow Philadelphia to dispense with “numerous bell-ringers, and their relays, at heavy annual salaries.”⁵⁷⁶ Despite the committee’s enthusiastic recommendation, the larger bodies of the Select and Common Councils wrangled for months before authorizing the mayor to sign a contract with Purdy and Phillips (who by then had been joined by Charles Robinson, the architect of New York’s two telegraph systems).⁵⁷⁷ The system that Philadelphia unveiled in April 1856 had roughly half the number of signal boxes recommended in the original plan, no hydraulic striking apparatuses, and it therefore required the same number of human bell

573. *The American Fire Alarm Telegraph* (New York, 1854), 4.

574. *Ibid.*, 3.

575. “Report of the Special Committee of the Select and Common Council in Relation to the Fire Alarm and Police Telegraph,” 255-67.

576. *Ibid.*, 248. See also *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning June 12, and Ending December 2, 1854* (Philadelphia: W. H. Sickels, 1854), 392-93, 431, App. 64, 247-270.

577. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning June 12, and Ending December 2, 1854*, 32, 49-52, 75-76, 303-04 481-82. Soon after the city contracted with Purdy, Phillips, and Robinson, Purdy sold his share of the enterprise. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning May 7, Ending November 1, 1855*, 3: App. 98.

ringers as the old system. The fire department's chief engineer, in his September 1856 report, remarked wistfully that the full count of 150 signal boxes would have been "preferable to the reduced number," although he still described the new telegraph as an "invaluable auxiliary."⁵⁷⁸ To compensate for the shortage of signal boxes throughout the city, he recommended installing boxes inside fire company houses.⁵⁷⁹

With a network of sparsely distributed signal boxes sounding out the number of the box nearest a fire, Philadelphia's city council reevaluated the codes struck by bell ringers at the State House and at district watch houses. Before the fire telegraph, these codes had indicated a fire's general direction in relation to the State House. Should they now indicate the number of the signal box from which an alarm originated?⁵⁸⁰ After months of deliberation, the Select and Common Councils settled on a hybrid code, which designated direction and district consecutively.⁵⁸¹ Bell ringers were ordered to alternately strike two repetitions of (1) a code corresponding to one of seven discrete districts, with four repetitions of (2) "the signal formerly used to indicate the direction" of the fire in relation to the State House.⁵⁸²

In the following decade, both Boston and New York abandoned district signals altogether. Boston reconfigured its alarm circuit in April 1864 to have the bells sound the number of the signal box from which an alarm originated. For an alarm originating at

578. B. A. Shoemaker, "Report of Chief Engineer of the Fire Department," Appendix No. 194, in *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning May 12, and Ending November 6, 1856* (Philadelphia, 1856), App. 304.

579. Ibid.

580. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, Beginning May 12, and Ending November 6, 1856*, 101, App. 47.

581. Ibid., 500, 529, App. 323-24.

582. Ibid., 324.

Box 175, for example, the code was performed as one blow, a pause, seven consecutive blows, another pause, and five blows.⁵⁸³ Before the switch from district to box signals, Boston's bells had communicated an essential component of a two-part message: the district number (provided by the alarm circuit bells) and the signal box number (provided by boxes on the signal circuit). With this early system, if the alarm circuit bells sounded an incorrect district signal, fire companies would end up at the right box number, but in the wrong section of the city. Once the switch from district to box signals was implemented, the alarm circuit amplified what the signal circuit chattered.

New York bell ringers (or at least those occupying lookout towers below Fourteenth Street) transitioned away from district codes shortly after the city disbanded its volunteer companies and established the Metropolitan Fire Department. Prior to the reorganization, New York was using the same district alarm system, supplemented by telegraphic communication between lookout towers, that Channing and Farmer had disparaged in their 1854 *American Fire Alarm Telegraph* pamphlet (described above). The city's new telegraph superintendent, Charles Chapin, oversaw the completion of improvements to the fire telegraph system initiated by his predecessor (Charles Robinson) and instituted additional reforms. By November 1865, a new alarm system linked the lookout towers to a central telegraph office, which in turn linked directly to thirty-nine "signal stations," comprised primarily of engine houses below Fourteenth Street.⁵⁸⁴ Each of the engine houses was equipped with a gong, which a central operator

583. "Municipal Record," *DCB*, 1, no. 2 (1854), 80-83.

584. *Annual Reports of the Board of Commissioners of the Metropolitan Fire Department, for the Years 1865 and 1866* (New York: Baker & Godwin, 1867), 13-14.

could strike to alert the occupants: a small company (twelve personnel) of full-time firefighters, outfitted with a horse-drawn steam engine.⁵⁸⁵ Instructions issued by Chapin to bell ringers explained that they would no longer strike district codes for fires below Fourteenth Street. Instead, they would learn new codes, corresponding to each of the signal stations plus twenty-four “localities”—other points, distributed throughout the city, having no connection to the telegraph system.⁵⁸⁶ Bell ringers should “fix upon prominent objects” near signal stations and localities so they would be able to spot a fire, by day or by night, and precisely communicate its location, first via telegraph and then by striking the same code on the alarm bell.⁵⁸⁷

The Absence of Alarm

When New York launched its new alarm system in November 1865, a commentary in the *New York Herald* predicted that firefighters would “soon be weaned by the attractions of the new from the jingling memories of the old alarm,” after which the bells would “entirely cease.”⁵⁸⁸ The newly formed Metropolitan Fire Department’s Board of Commissioners echoed these sentiments in their first annual report, expressing a desire “to discontinue, at as early a date as may be convenient with public safety, the ringing of fire-bells.”⁵⁸⁹ A year later, the city’s bell ringers were still striking out signal station codes, and the commissioners had gained perspective. After investigating, they

585. *Ibid.*, 7.

586. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

587. *Ibid.*, 15-17.

588. “The New Fire Alarm System,” *New York Herald*, 16 November 1865, [1].

589. *Annual Reports of the Board of Commissioners of the Metropolitan Fire Department, for the Years 1865 and 1866*, 5.

had realized that the city would need to install hundreds of signal boxes before dispensing with the lookout towers and alarm bells. A project of that scale would cost upward of \$400,000, so they recommended that New York make do with its current system and wait for the necessary patents to expire.⁵⁹⁰ Over the next few years, the commissioners made some progress toward reducing the duration and frequency of alarm ringing. In June 1867, they restricted each bell to sounding for fires within a designated territory. These territories were still quite large (more than ten square miles for certain towers), but the 11,000-pound bell of the Marion Street tower (near the present-day intersection of Lafayette and Spring Streets), for example, no longer sounded for fires above Forty-Second Street.⁵⁹¹ The following month, the commissioners took a bolder step by selling the enormous, cracked bell of City Hall and discontinuing that station altogether.⁵⁹²

New York's remaining alarm bells continued to sound for fires within their designated territories until after the city spent more than \$450,000 on a new fire telegraph system, constructed according to Channing and Farmer's model.⁵⁹³ With signal boxes distributed every four blocks and a captured audience of full-time firefighters, kept at constant readiness, New York met the necessary technological and organizational preconditions for dispensing with the fire bell. Philadelphia and Boston met the same

590. Ibid., 58.

591. *Third Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York* (Albany, NY: Van Benthuysen & Sons, 1868), 101. The commissioners further reduced the territory of each alarm bell in October 1868. *Fourth Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York* (Albany, NY: Argus, 1869), 75-76.

592. Ibid.

593. *Fifth Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York* (New York: Bradstreet Press, 1870), 4, 45-49; "First Annual Report of the Fire Department of the City of New York," *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, for the year 1871* (New York, 1871), 17; "Document No. 4," 24 April 1871, *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, for the year 1871* (New York: 1871), 165-66, Chap. 465.

conditions (although in reverse order from New York) before silencing their alarm bells. Philadelphia continued to add signal boxes, on the streets and in engine houses, after unveiling its fire telegraph system in 1856.⁵⁹⁴ In December 1870, the mayor signed a bill to establish a paid fire department with several full-time personnel in each company.⁵⁹⁵ Two years later, the city began selling off the alarm bells of its district watch houses.⁵⁹⁶ Boston, which had full-time engine companies by 1860, quieted its alarm circuit bells within the city proper in 1886.⁵⁹⁷ In all three communities, efforts to do away with the fire bell met opposition.

Philadelphia and New York, which retained human bell ringers until the end, encountered a source of opposition that Boston avoided. Although bell ringing remained a lowly occupation, the need to continually staff watch houses and lookout towers created multiple salaried positions. Filling these positions was left to the discretion of powerful elected officials; usually, the mayor was at some level involved. Consequently, bell ringers (and later telegraph operators) were sometimes appointed for reasons other than experience or dedication to public safety. Philadelphia's special committee alluded to this

594. *Ordinances and Joint Resolutions of the City of Philadelphia From January 1st to December 31st, 1866* (Philadelphia, PA: King & Baird, 1867) 63; *Ordinances and Joint Resolutions... January 1st to December 31st, 1868*, 308, 376, 428, 470.

595. *Journal of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, for the Year 1872* (Philadelphia, PA: King and Baird, 1872), 1: App. 51.

596. *Ordinances and Joint Resolutions of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: King and Baird, 1874), 140.

597. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Fire Commissioners, for the Year Ending April 30, 1887* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), iv, xv; Brayley, *Complete History of the Boston Fire Department*, 1:234, 315, 2: 337.

problem when advocating for Farmer's striking apparatus in 1854, remarking darkly on the "unwholesome influence" of "great official patronage."⁵⁹⁸

The political appointment of bell ringers was especially contentious in New York, where the need to staff district lookout towers around the clock created up to thirty-three salaried positions. The issue exploded spectacularly in September 1850, when the fire department's chief engineer (who thought bell ringers should be appointed by the chief engineer) accused bell ringers (then detailed from the police force by the mayor) of neglecting their posts, sounding incorrect codes and false alarms, and refusing to follow orders from the fire department. At the same time, he charged specific public officials—including the police chief, mayor, and several aldermen—with releasing bell ringers from tower duty for police work, leaving vacancies unfilled to accommodate political appointees, and assigning tower duty to inexperienced and incompetent officers.⁵⁹⁹ This prompted an immediate investigation of the chief engineer's allegations, and it led eventually to an ordinance entrusting the mayor with the appointment of bell ringers from the ranks of exempt firemen.⁶⁰⁰ These positions were in high demand; when a new mayor took office in January 1864, the *New York Herald* reported an "immense rush" of more than eight hundred applicants.⁶⁰¹ Until New York retired its alarm bells, press

598. "Report of the Special Committee of the Select and Common Council in Relation to the Fire Alarm and Police Telegraph," 248.

599. "Document No. 57," *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, vol. 17, no. 2 (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1850), 919-53. See also *Proceedings and Documents of the Board of Assistant Aldermen* (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1851), 34: 341-45.

600. "Document No. 62," *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, vol. 17, no. 2 (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1850), 1009-068; *Compilation of the Laws of the State of New York*, 328.

601. "The Mayor's Office. Removals and Appointments of Telegraph Operators and Bell Ringers," *New York Herald*, 6 January 1864, 5.

commentary on proposed reforms to the city's fire alarm system commonly cited the political appointment of bell ringers—aka the “political pensioners” or the “friends of our Aldermen and Councilmen”—as an obstacle to progress.⁶⁰²

In all three cities, efforts to dispense with the fire bell encountered resistance from firefighters, who insisted that an accumulation of chattering signal boxes did not fill the same function as the public alarm from belfries. When Philadelphia Mayor Alexander Henry declared, in November 1862, that the State House bell's participation in alarms had been “obviated by the instantaneous communication of the locality of the a conflagration to the several steam fire engine houses in the appropriate districts,” a fireman responded in a letter to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.⁶⁰³ Wiring engine houses to the telegraph, he argued, would not render the State House bell unnecessary if firefighters could not occupy the engine houses around the clock to receive alarms. An existing ordinance, the writer reminded the mayor, specifically forbade firefighters to “bunk” in engine houses (a practice some feared would contribute to “the demoralization of youth”).⁶⁰⁴ Although some companies allowed members to sleep on the premises anyway, others followed the law, and those firefighters relied on the State House bell to wake them if they were needed at night. Moreover, aside from full-time drivers and engineers, firefighters could not “gain their livelihood by sitting at their engine houses listening for

602. “The American Fire-Alarm and Police Telegraph,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1860, 5; “Our Fire-Alarm Signals,” *New York Times*, 27 June 1869, 4.

603. “Fire Alarm Bells and the Firemen,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 November 1862, 8.

604. For an explanation of bunking and why some opposed it, see “Report of the Minority of the Committee on Cities, Relative to ‘An Act to Create a Metropolitan Fire District, and Establish a Fire Department Therein,’” *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York, 88th Session*, 8, No. 168 (1865), 4-5.

the telegraph to sound the alarm for a fire.”⁶⁰⁵ The “tinkling alarm of the telegraph some distance off” did not suffice.⁶⁰⁶ Even after entire engine companies were allowed to bunk, firefighters left their engine house periodically for meals and to patrol for fires. Although the signal boxes were informative, they did not give a sufficient alarm.

Fire insurers comprised another audience who, some of the time and in some circumstances, resisted the fire bell’s discontinuation. On one hand, insurance agents associated the practice with an antiquated, disorderly mode of firefighting that put property at risk. The bell alarm agitated listeners (youthful, male, working-class listeners were thought to be especially susceptible), and it invited idle and suspected persons to plunder and pillage. One insurance agent, when urging Philadelphia’s city council to establish a paid fire department, described “the interest taken, and the excitement attending on fires in the whole community” as the source of the volunteer system’s troubles.⁶⁰⁷ Alarm bells, indiscriminately broadcasting the location of a fire to the the multitude, were fundamentally incompatible with the superior mode of firefighting the agent dreamed of, which required “[t]he doing away with the ringing of bells, the absence of all alarm, and the quiet proceeding of the engines to the fire, under the silent but efficient indications of the Fire Telegraph.”⁶⁰⁸ Yet for all their complaining about the fire bell’s disorderly effects, fire insurers liked to keep informed. In New York, they

605. “Fire Alarm Bells and the Firemen,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 November 1862, 8.

606. “Fire Alarm Bells and the Firemen,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 November 1862, 8. Boston delayed disconnecting its alarm circuit bells for a similar reason in 1880. Although most of the department were full-time, a few call companies still needed the bell alarm. See “Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Fire Commissioners, for the Year Ending April 30, 1880,” *DCB*, 2, no. 58 (1880), vii-viii.

607. “George Wood to Thomas Potter, 4 March 1859,” 20.

608. *Ibid.*, 20.

occasionally pushed back against restrictions that the city's fire commissioners imposed. In June 1867, when the commissioners first constrained the territories of alarm bells, they restricted the bell of the Post Office on Nassau Street to fires below Fourteenth Street. But the offices of the New York Board of Fire Underwriters and nearly all fire insurers were clustered in what is now the Financial District, within a quarter-mile radius of the Post Office. This audience of fire insurers relied on the Post Office bell for intelligence of fires occurring throughout the city, and they persuaded the commissioners to extend the bell's territory north to Seventy-Ninth Street during daytime hours.⁶⁰⁹

In addition to firefighters and insurers, other specialized audiences opposed measures to subdue and eliminate the fire bell. It was business owners, distressed by accounts of the "Great Fire" sweeping through Boston's commercial district, who petitioned the Philadelphia Board of Fire Commissioners in November 1872 to resume sounding alarm bells to indicate the location of nighttime fires. Citizens living at a distance from their business property should have notification of fires, so they could oversee salvage efforts.⁶¹⁰ The *Philadelphia Inquirer* deemed this request "so proper" that there should be no question of granting it.⁶¹¹ The *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, after reviewing letters from readers on both sides of the issue, agreed that business owners unquestionably deserved prompt notice if their property was threatened, but argued that the proposed remedy would "excite general alarm without giving the desired

609. *Third Annual Report of the MFD*, 102.

610. "Fire Alarms," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1872, 2.

611. "A Petition, addressed to the Fire Commissioners, to order the ringing of alarm bells at night..." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 November 1872, [4].

information.”⁶¹² Returning the State House and district alarm bells to service would merely inform business owners “that a fire is raging somewhere within a large geographical district of the city.”⁶¹³ It could also rouse the “old-fashioned fire crowds” and aid “thieves, burglars and bad characters generally.”⁶¹⁴

The fire bell also had defenders among the general audience who did not own businesses in distant neighborhoods. Property owners of all classes desired a chance to rescue what was theirs. Some, like Hervey Waters of Boston, thought a district signal was sufficiently informative, because of the possibilities it allowed listeners to rule out. “When there is a fire in the city,” Waters explained, “it is a great satisfaction to know, not in particular where the fire is, but where it is not, so that if I hear a number sounded, and it is not the number of the district in which I reside, I can remain about my business if it is in the day time, or I can remain quiet in my house, if it is in the night time.”⁶¹⁵ The question of property aside, there was also a sense that a fire was a public happening with public consequences, and its existence and location were facts all persons living in a community had a right to know, whether or not their own property was threatened. Firefighters wanted to be alarmed; the public wanted to be informed.

In April 1870, shortly after New York’s signal boxes began operating below Fourteenth Street, a new Board of Fire Commissioners (now operating under the auspices of the Fire Department of New York, which had replaced the Metropolitan Fire

612. “Fire Warnings to Property Owners,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 29 November 1872, [2].

613. *Ibid.*, [2].

614. *Ibid.*, [2].

615. *Record of the Proceedings before the United States Patent Office... May 19th, 1857*, 260.

Department) deliberated the fate of the city's alarm bells. The previous board, having declared their intent to eliminate both bells and bell ringers, had instituted small changes to reduce the duration and frequency of alarm ringing.⁶¹⁶ The new board, after considering the interests of firefighters, insurers, and "the people," concluded that dispensing with the alarm bells would be "inexpedient."⁶¹⁷ And, because the federal government had repossessed the Post Office belfry, the commissioners proposed erecting a new tower—for the safety of Lower Manhattan. It was June 1873 when another slate of commissioners made good on their promise to silence alarm bells in districts supplied with signal boxes, to the consternation of specific and general audiences.⁶¹⁸ Roughly a week after bell ringers left their posts, a fire broke out on Sullivan Street, less than a block from one of the former alarm towers. "The public in the neighborhood denounce the Fire Department fiercely," the *New York Herald* reported. "It is said that owing to the non-ringing of the bells nothing was known of the fire for some time after it broke out."⁶¹⁹ In the ensuing controversy, firefighters complained that the alarm bells' silence hampered their efficiency, and the Board of Fire Underwriters demanded a meeting with the Board of Fire Commissioners.⁶²⁰ The commissioners held their ground. A month after the fire bell fell silent in parts of New York, a commentary in the *New York Times* summarized

616. *Fifth Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York* (New York: Bradstreet Press, 1870), 4. The former board of commissioners had relinquished the Post Office belfry to the US government (who wanted the space) and instructed bell ringers at the remaining alarm towers to strike only three rounds of code for first alarms. "The Fire Department," *New York Herald*, 21 March 1870, 8.

617. "First Annual Report of the Fire Department of the City of New York," *Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, for the year 1871* (New York, 1871), 17-18 (quotation, 17).

618. "Fire Department," *City Record*, 29 August 1873, 234-35.

619. "The Flames Raging," *New York Herald*, 9 June 1873, 3.

620. "Ring the Fire Bells," *New York Times*, 1 July 1873, 8.

the practice as having performed “well enough in the days before telegraphs,” before relegating it to ranks of “old customs” that the city’s noisy new soundscape was better off without.⁶²¹

621. “The Fire Commissioners have declined to sanction the renewal of the old custom of ringing fire-bells...” *New York Times*, 1 July 1873, 4.



Figure 4.1. This figure shows the extent of New York's built environment as depicted on the 1782 map of the city compiled by George E. Waring (Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, United States. Census Office, Part I, 1886). Areas burned during the fire on September 21, 1776, are compiled from indications on Waring's map as well as a map published in Augustin Costello's history of the New York Fire Department (Our Firemen: A History of the New York Fire Departments, Volunteer and Paid (New York, 1887), 200.

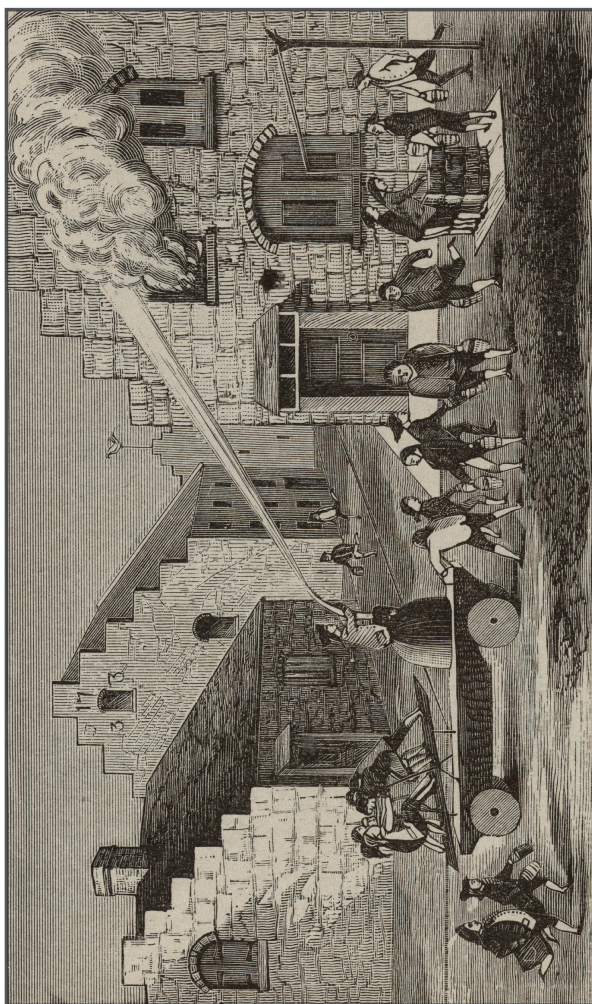


Figure 4.2. This illustration from a 1733 fire certificate depicts New York volunteers extinguishing a fire. Inhabitants respond to the alarm with buckets and form two lines (one to supply the engine with water and another to return empty buckets) between the engine and a nearby well. Firemen work the engine manually to force a stream of water on the flames. (Reprinted from Augustine Costello, *Our Firemen: A History of the New York Fire Departments, Volunteer and Paid* [New York, 1887], 28. This same illustration was also printed in an earlier history of New York firefighting. See George William Sheldon, *The Story of the Volunteer Fire Department of the City of New York* [New York, 1882], 7.)



Figure 4.3. The Broad Street Riot took place on the afternoon of June 11, 1837, when members of Engine Company No. 20 scuffled with participants in a large Irish funeral procession, which was assembling in the street outside the engine house (A). To warn away their opposing combatants, the engine company rang the bell of their engine, and someone rang the bell of the New South Church “as for fire” (B). Engine Company No. 14 responded to this alarm (C), swinging by the New South Church and then continuing down Summer Street, in search of the fire. By this time the funeral procession was moving north on Broad Street, and the two groups collided at the intersection of Broad and Summer Streets (D).

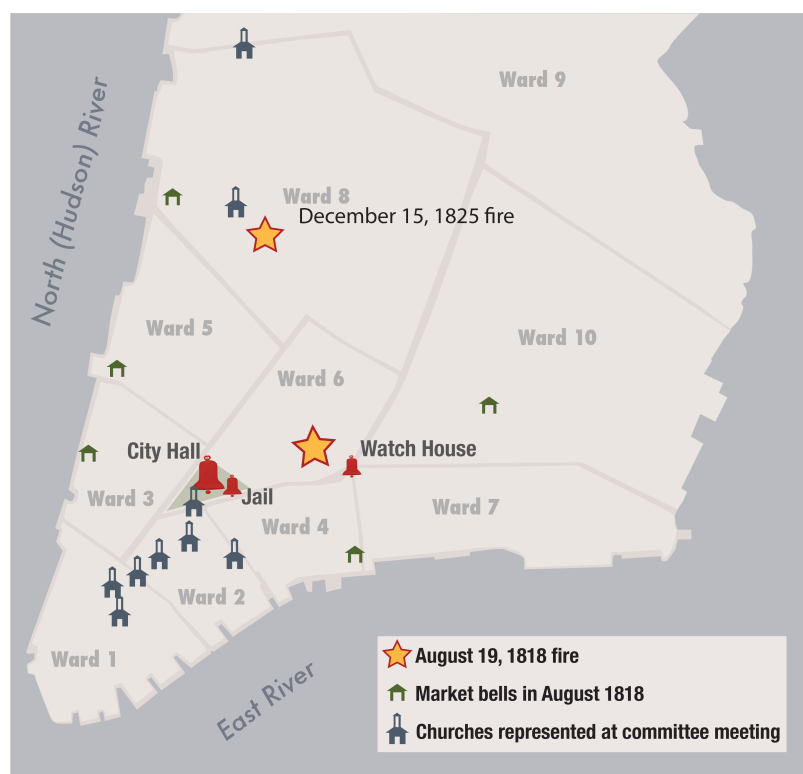


Figure 4.4. By 1818, New York's fire alarm system incorporated church bells, as well as the bells of City Hall and the jail, a watch house located at the juncture of Wards 4, 6, 7, and 10, and five market bells. On the morning of August 19, 1818, a fire consumed five to six tenement houses in the impoverished Ward 6. Some church bells reportedly failed to ring for the alarm, and fire companies were slow to respond. A Common Council committee (predominated by aldermen from Ward 3) launched a thorough investigation of the lapse. Two days after the fire, they met with delegates from nine churches (predominately from the lower wards), who offered assurances that their sextons would ring for future fire alarms.



Figure 4.5. In 1828, Philadelphia (upper) implemented an audible fire alarm code that indicated a fire's general location in relation to the State House. The success of this system was somewhat dependent on the State House being situated near the center of Philadelphia's population. New York (lower) used a similar code to direct fire companies to predesignated districts, rather than sending responders in a general direction, which worked better with that city's elongated geography.

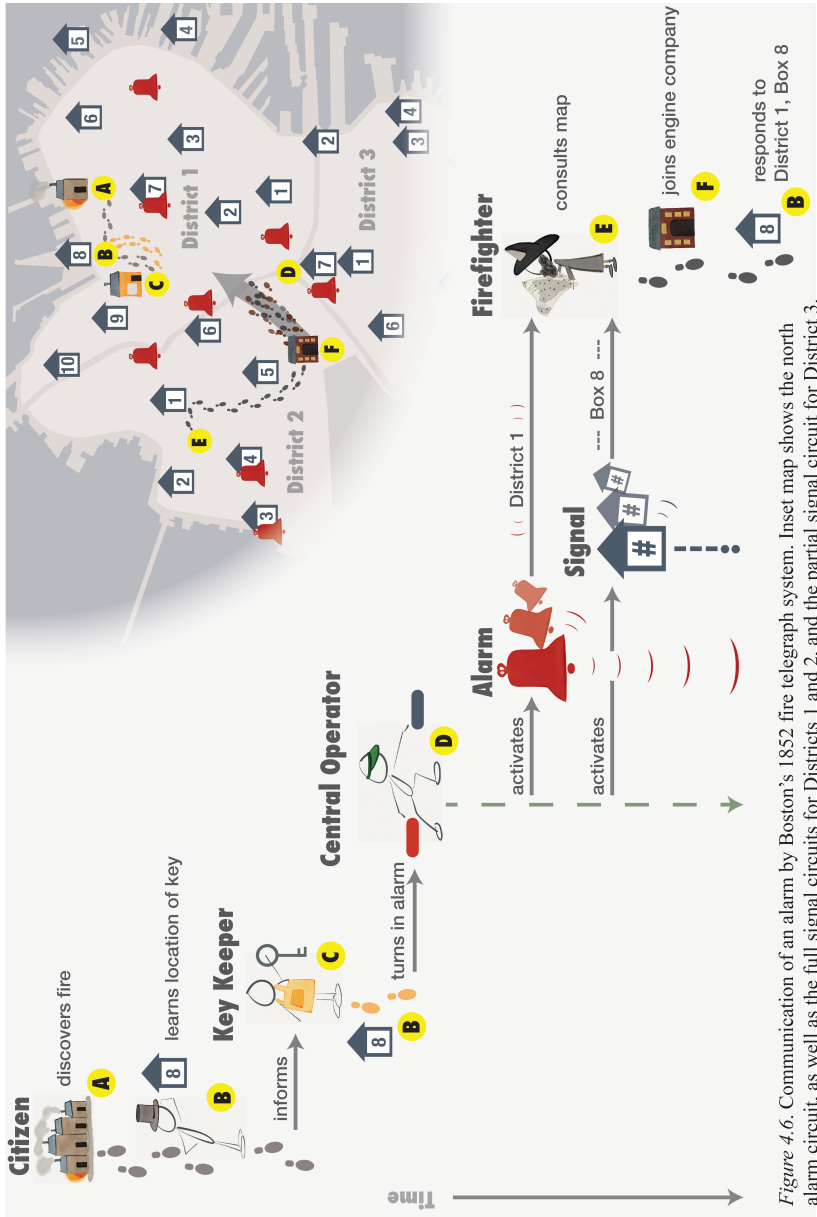


Figure 4.6. Communication of an alarm by Boston's 1852 fire telegraph system. Inset map shows the north alarm circuit, as well as the full signal circuit for Districts 1 and 2, and the partial signal circuit for District 3.

CHAPTER FIVE

Remembering the Churchgoing Bell

I caught myself singing a snatch of Robinson Crusoe's song this morning,—

—The sound of the church-going bell
These valleys and rocks never heard.

— W. M. L. Jay, 1872⁶²²

So much the better for those valleys and rocks, so far as the bell is concerned.

J. M. Philp, 1878⁶²³

On a Wednesday in early February 1709, off an island four hundred miles west of present-day Chile, two British privateers paused to gather provisions. The landing party soon returned, the expedition's leader later recounted, with "a Man cloth'd in Goat-Skins, who look'd wilder than the first Owners of them."⁶²⁴ The skin-clad refugee was Alexander Selkirk, a thirty-something sailor from southeast Scotland who had survived more than four years on the island, subsisting on goat meat and staving off loneliness with Bible-reading and prayer. Selkirk joined the privateers in their venture and returned with them to England, where the story of his extended solitude sparked widespread interest. A decade after Selkirk's rescue, the English public embraced another story of a castaway's peril and perseverance: Daniel Defoe's novel, *The Life and Strange*

622. W. M. L. Jay [Julia Louisa M. Woodruff], *Shiloh, Or, Without and Within* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1872), 108.

623. J. M. Philp, "Noise," *New York Times*, 18 August 1878, 4, reprinted from *Tinsley's Magazine*.

624. Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage Round the World* (London, 1712), 125.

Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe. Defoe shipwrecked his protagonist (rather than marooning him) in the Caribbean (rather than the South Pacific) for twenty-eight (rather than four) years, yet the similarities between Crusoe's and Selkirk's adventures were striking. Although Defoe never acknowledged Selkirk as his inspiration, by the mid-eighteenth century Selkirk's experiences were widely assumed to be the raw material from which Defoe had spun a profitable fiction. William Guthrie's popular geographical compendium, for example, explained that Selkirk had entrusted his papers to Defoe, who had subsequently "defraud[ed]" Selkirk by embellishing the facts of the sailor's misfortune into a bestseller without offering compensation.⁶²⁵

Consequently, distinctions between Selkirk's adventures and Crusoe's were considerably eroded by 1782, when William Cowper released "Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk during his solitary Abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez." Cowper reimagined the unlucky sailor's isolation over seven stanzas, opening with a bold declaration of sovereignty ("I am monarch of all I survey") before quickly descending into an extended lament for the comforts and pleasures of human society. Among these were the sounds of organized religion.

But the sound of the church going bell
 These vallies and rocks never heard,
 Ne'er sigh'd at the sound of a knell,

625. William Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar; and Present State of the Several Kingdoms of the World* (London: 1770), 645. For an in-depth review of scholarship addressing the role of Selkirk (and other historical castaways) in inspiring Defoe's novel, see David Fausett, *The Strange Surprising Sources of Robinson Crusoe* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1994), esp. 1-16.

Or smiled when a Sabbath appear'd.⁶²⁶

The above lines are significant for ushering the term *churchgoing bell* into common usage.⁶²⁷ They also put words into Selkirk's—and, by extension, Crusoe's—mouth. For as the poem circulated on both sides of the Atlantic, Cowper's part in supposing the stanzas was, at times, passed over. The *United States Chronicle* of Providence, Rhode Island, presented readers with lines "said to be written by Alexander Selkirk (alias Robinson Crusoe)," while a widely reprinted letter to the editor of the *London Chronicle* ventured further, praising the historical castaway's poetic prowess and informing readers that Selkirk had "frequently courted the muses" while stranded.⁶²⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, Cowper's "Verses" had been set to music and could be found in school readers and anthologies (sometimes re-titled "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"), and the lines depicting an isolation beyond the churchgoing bell's reach readily evoked an absence of Christian civilization. Pioneers reflected on the words of "Robinson Crusoe's song" en route to western territories; missionaries repeated them when aspiring to evangelize the inhabitants of far-off places.⁶²⁹

626. William Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper* (London: J. Johnson, 1782), 307.

627. Two decades later, William Wordsworth witnessed the phrase's speedy adoption with dismay and scorned Cowper's unorthodox grammar: "The epithet 'church-going' applied to a bell, and that by so chaste a writer as Cowper, is an instance of the strange abuses which Poets have introduced into their language till they and their Readers take them as matters of course, if they do not single them out expressly as objects of admiration." William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems, in Two Volumes*, second edition, vol. 2 (London, 1802), 246.

628. EDINBURGENSIS, "To the Printer of the London Chronicle," *London Chronicle*, 20 October 1787, [7]; "Lines. Said to be written by Alexander Selkirk (alias Robinson Crusoe) while on the Island of Juan Fernandes, *Providence (RI) United States Chronicle*, 18 July 1793, [4].

629. For examples of nineteenth-century Americans reflecting on Cowper's stanza, see Eliza Ann McAuley Egbert, "Diary of Ann McAuley Egbert, April, 1852," in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, edited by Kenneth L. Holmes (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 37-38; Randall H. Hewitt, *Across the Plains and over the Divide: A Mule Train Journey from East to West in 1862* (New York, NY: Broadway Publishing, 1906), 126-27; G. T., "African Bell Tower," *The Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor*, vol. 11 (1875), 91-94.

This is why, in July 1875, editors of the *Georgia Weekly Telegraph* addressed a week-long uproar over the Sunday habits of Macon congregations by excerpting lines from Cowper's poem and inviting readers to reconsider "'poor old Robinson Crusoe's' bill of complaint against his solitary and involuntary insular position."⁶³⁰ The editors themselves had ignited the public conflict by endorsing a protest from residents of Mulberry Street against the "loud and long-repeated" ringing of church bells in that vicinity.⁶³¹ The "clangor" disrupted conversation, the complainants had argued. It rattled windows, tormented sick persons, and set neighborhood dogs howling. Most importantly, the residents had insisted (and the editors had agreed), the ringing was wholly unnecessary, as the hours of services were routinely announced from pulpits and published in the Sunday morning paper.⁶³² The protest had provoked a call to procure *more* bells—a full peal to make "sweeter Sunday music"—and an impassioned defense of the churchgoing bell's necessity. Not only did the ringing remind inhabitants of services, advocates had argued, it also evoked edifying associations. "Would it be at all like Sunday here in Macon," one had asked, "if no church bell sent out the old accustomed sound to call her citizens to the house of God?"⁶³³ In response to this backlash, the editors revised their initial position. Ringing bells before religious services was an established use, they now acknowledged, and one that "must be enjoyed by those who like it and

630. "The Church-going Bells," *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6].

631. The initial complaint and subsequent correspondence did not identify specific congregations, but the offending belfries almost certainly belonged to the Mulberry Street Methodist and First Presbyterian churches, which were located approximately a block apart on Mulberry Street.

632. "A Protest," *Macon Telegraph and Messenger*, 29 June 1875, [2]. The daily *Macon Telegraph and Messenger* shared an editorial board with the *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*.

633. Jack Sparrow, "Church Bells," *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6].

tolerated by those who don't." But they prefaced this concession with a conjecture. Had there been "half a dozen bells all in motion at the mouth of his cave," they ventured, Crusoe would never have yearned for the churchgoing bell's sound. And if Crusoe had suffered from nervous headaches or related conditions, he might have banished bells from his island altogether.⁶³⁴

By the summer of 1875, scrutinizing Crusoe's (or Selkirk's) devotion to the churchgoing bell's sound was a familiar gambit in a recurring skirmish that had roiled communities smaller than Macon and as populous as New York City.⁶³⁵ Public opposition to the practice was nearing a critical juncture: the following year, residents of Philadelphia's wealthy Rittenhouse neighborhood turned to the courts for relief from the newly installed bells of St. Mark's Episcopal Church. The decision in this case, favorable to the complainants, established a precedent for constraining the use of church bells in circumstances where it caused annoyance or injury. The late-nineteenth-century outcry against church bells has been interpreted from different scholarly perspectives. Hillel Schwartz extensively explored the reasons St. Mark's' neighbors and their like-minded contemporaries opposed the noise of church bells—why they deemed the familiar sound

634. "The Church-going Bells," *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6].

635. The Selkirk/Crusoe argument turned in up a number of late-nineteenth-century commentaries and letters to the editor. Two weeks before the controversy in Macon, for example, a subscriber to the *Hartford Daily Courant* expressed envy of "Mr. Alexander Selkirk, or the 'valleys and rocks' of which he sings" when commenting on the ringing habits of two local congregations. One Who Can't Get Used To It, "Still Another," *Hartford Daily Courant*, 15 June 1875, 2. The argument also surfaced in at least two novels. Marietta Holley, a contemporary of Mark Twain with a readership of of comparable size, devoted a full chapter of her 1892 novel, *Samantha Among the Brethren*, to a high-stakes debate between the titular protagonist and a pious, but hard-hearted, deacon. In the story, the life of an ailing missionary depends upon a few hours' sleep one Sunday morning. The pious deacon, however, refuses to suspend the early bell, citing the song of "the late lamented Mr. Selkirk," thereby sealing the missionary's fate. Marietta Holley, *Samantha Among the Brethren* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1892), 310-34. See also W. M. L. Jay [Julia Louisa M. Woodruff], *Shiloh, Or, Without and Within* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1872), 108.

superfluous, meaningless, unmusical, harmful, and generally incompatible with the conditions of modernity.⁶³⁶ For Isaac Weiner, efforts to silence church bells manifest a modern rejection of “noisy religion” in exchange for intellectual, introspective modes of Christian worship. Listeners who challenged churches’ long-standing right to ring bells, Weiner contended, heard the sound “as extraneous to religion, properly conceived, external and secondary to its substance.”⁶³⁷ Here, I approach the churchgoing bell as a communication practice: a habitual use of bells in a distinct context to achieve particular ends. In both the Macon and Philadelphia disputes, complaints and rebuttals were specific to the use of bells in advance of religious services. What sounding a bell in this context did (or should) accomplish, the meanings and associations it conveyed, who it addressed, and how this audience should respond were matters opposing parties conceived differently from the moment public opposition surfaced—roughly fifty years before a Philadelphia judge restrained the bells of St. Mark’s Church.

Late-nineteenth-century Americans reached far into the historical, literary, and remembered past when debating the churchgoing bell’s compatibility with modern conditions. To interpret their arguments, I look to earlier contexts and confrontations—before Cowper’s poetry or Defoe’s prose, and even before Selkirk’s rescue from a South Pacific island. In early American communities, how did listeners conceive the churchgoing bell’s purpose, its audience, and its message? How did they evaluate its

636. Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2011), 301-14.

637. Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 6, 56.

sound? How did the debate take shape in the five decades preceding the seminal lawsuit in Philadelphia?

Assembling the Faithful

In late-nineteenth-century disputes, the churchgoing bell's defenders often traced the practice to "time immemorial," a moment preceding both living memory and written record, and the churchgoing bell's detractors seldom challenged this assertion directly. But Christians did not always assemble for worship publicly to the sound of a tower bell. The earliest congregations met secretly, wary of persecution. When audible invitations were introduced, they were first given vocally and were later conveyed by trumpets and semantrons. The use of tower bells for calling laity to religious services is difficult to date precisely, for reasons Percival Price has addressed at length. Larger bells, affixed to buildings, addressed monastery populations as early as the sixth century. By Price's estimate, these "far-sounding" church bells diffused slowly, first to cathedrals and then to large churches, and were common in rural areas by the turn of the eleventh century.⁶³⁸ At the time of the Protestant Reformation, then, bells had been assembling Christians to religious services for nearly half a millennium.

After the English Church renounced papal authority, Protestant reformers sought to selectively suppress "superstitious" practices in an effort to extinguish persisting allegiances to Rome.⁶³⁹ Among the practices targeted were certain uses of bells in and

638. Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 78-94 (quotation, 91).

639. For more on Protestant reformers' efforts to suppress or rehabilitate bell practices, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart*

around the times of religious services. Henry VIII's 1538 injunctions proscribed the "knelling of the Aves" to undermine a longstanding arrangement in which the bell prompted parishioners, either before or after services, to pray for and receive pardon from "the Bishop of Rome."⁶⁴⁰ Articles and injunctions issued under Edward VI, a decade later, targeted similar indulgences by banning the sacring bell, which sounded during mass at the elevation of the host.⁶⁴¹ In contrast, bells that called parishioners to assemble for religious services escaped censure and were adopted as Church policy. The 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* instructed every curate to say morning and evening prayers daily at his respective church or chapel and to toll a bell "a convenient tyme" in advance, "that such as be disposed may come to hear Goddes worde, and to praie with hym."⁶⁴² Elizabeth I's 1559 injunctions silenced bells *during* the litany, common prayer, sermon, and reading of scripture, but made an exception for "one bell at convenient time to be rung or knelled

England (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1989); David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert Adam Hill, "The Reformation of the Bells in Early Modern England" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2012); Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

640. Walter Howard Frere and William McClure Kennedy, eds., *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation, 1536-1558*, 2: 42. Frere and Kennedy trace this custom to a 1399 order by the Archbishop of Canterbury. See also related articles and injunctions by Nicholas Shaxton (1538) and Thomas Cranmer (1548) in same volume: 60, 186-87. I fully agree with Robert Adam Hill's conclusion that reformers targeted the Ave bell not only for theological reasons but also to dispense with a Roman Catholic intrusion into parish life. I am not convinced, however, that contemporary listeners understood the sound itself to offer forgiveness. See Hill, "Reformation of the Bells," Chapter Three (106-10).

641. Frere and Kennedy (eds.), *Visitation Articles and Injunctions*, vol. 2, 124 (quotation), 186-87, 235, 263-64, 286. In sixteenth-century English parishes, the sacring bell (the practice) was often sounded inside the church on a small bell (a bronze artifact, also called the "sacring bell"). As Frere and Kennedy note, however, a 1281 order issued by the archbishop of Canterbury indicates the use of tower bells to address a larger audience. According to this order, the bells should be tolled "at the elevation of the Body of Christ, that the people who have not leisure daily to be present at mass, may wherever they are, in houses, or fields, bow their knees in order to the having the indulgences granted by many bishops" (quoted in Frere and Kennedy, 273). For an alternative interpretation of the sacring bell's function and reformers' motivation for silencing it, see See Hill, "Reformation of the Bells," Chapter Three (110-13).

642. William Keeling, ed. *Liturgiae Britanniae, or the Several Editions of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, from Its Compilation to the Last Revision*, 2nd ed. (London: William Pickering, 1851), xvii. These instructions were retained in later editions.

before the sermon.”⁶⁴³ Under James I, the Anglican Canons stipulated that a bell sound before litany services on Wednesdays and Fridays, urging every household within a half-mile of the church to send at least one representative “fit to join with the Minister in prayers.”⁶⁴⁴ In each of these approved contexts, the purpose of sounding a bell was to notify parishioners of impending services in time to leave their homes, travel, and collect for public activity. Quite possibly, some parishioners who heard the bell remained in their homes and responded by praying privately. The reason the bell sounded, however, was not to prompt remote prayer but to facilitate public, collective activity.

Religious dissenters, too, used bells to convene meetings. Initially, Puritans dissatisfied with the frequency and content of sermons preached by the established Church’s clergy organized “lectures”: paid sermons, delivered by dissenting preachers at the parish church when the premises were not otherwise in use. St. Antholin’s Church, among a number of London congregations to endow longterm lectureships during Elizabeth’s reign, began ringing its bell for these weekday meetings at five o’clock in the morning, an hour before the sermon commenced.⁶⁴⁵ The lectureship arrangement gave Puritans a forum for propagating their ideas and a means of supporting their ministers, Paul S. Seaver has argued, and both lecturers and lectureships were targeted before the Interregnum to suppress Puritan influence.⁶⁴⁶ After the Restoration, a series of penal laws excluded Puritans and other nonconformists from public life and impeded their ability to

643. Frere and Kennedy (eds.), *Visitation Articles and Injunctions*, vol. 3, 15.

644. *Ibid.*, 24.

645. Henry Machyn, *The Diary of Henry Machyn: Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, from A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1563* (Camden Society, 1848), 212. See also Isabel M. Calder, “The St. Antholin Lectures,” *Church Quarterly Review*, 160 (1959): 49–70.

646. Paul Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1970).

openly worship as they saw fit. First, the Corporation Act (1661) made Anglican communion a prerequisite for election to a municipal office. A year later, the Act of Uniformity (1662) mandated that religious services follow the Book of Common Prayer, causing more than two thousand clergy to resign their livings. Of the six lecturers preaching from St. Antholin's pulpit at the time, only one conformed to the established Church.⁶⁴⁷ Two years later, the Conventicle Act (1664) outlawed the independent gatherings dissenters had resorted to—in homes or barns, and on hillsides—by proscribing meetings of more than five persons who did not belong to the same household. These laws were temporarily suspended by the Declaration of Indulgence (1672), and the Toleration Act (1689) permitted licensed religious meetings by Protestant dissenters who met certain conditions. Even so, dissenters who failed to heed the parish bell's summons at least once a year, to receive Anglican communion, were nominally excluded from aspects of public life until the Corporation Act's repeal in 1828.⁶⁴⁸

In the late decades of the seventeenth century, then, when each of Boston's three Puritan congregations assembled to the sound of its own bell, they exercised a privilege their counterparts in England did not enjoy. For half a century, the town's Puritan congregations enjoyed this privilege exclusively, and they resisted changes that followed the Massachusetts Bay Colony's absorption into the Dominion of New England.⁶⁴⁹

647. Calder, "St. Antholin Lectures," 57-58; Seaver, *Puritan Lectureships*, 285-87. According to Seaver, only seven of sixty-two Puritans lecturing in London between the Restoration and the Act of Uniformity conformed.

648. John Spurr, "Later Stuart Puritanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, 89-105. For an overview of Restoration penal laws, see John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689* (London: Routledge, 2000), esp. 166-96.

649. The Dominion of New England (1686-1689) combined the Massachusetts Bay Colony and several other New England territories under a single administrative unit. The commission, issued by James

Official notice of the administrative restructuring arrived in May 1686. Aboard the same ship was an Anglican minister, dispatched by the Bishop of London, who proposed that one of Boston's dissenting congregations relinquish its meeting house for the Church of England's use. This request was quickly denied, and several months later the First Church declined a related request to toll its bell before Anglican prayer services, which were by then being held on Wednesdays and Fridays at the town's exchange building.⁶⁵⁰ Refusing proved less effective after the December arrival of Edmund Andros, who approached the town's ministers about arranging dual use of a meeting house on the day he was sworn in as governor. To the relief of Samuel Sewall and other Puritans, Andros seemed to indicate that he would not press the matter. A month later, though, the First Church's bell began ringing before Anglican services (then held at the town house) on festival and commemoration days. Then, in the week before Easter, the governor made his intentions clear. After viewing all three meeting houses, he sent for the keys to the newest building, Sewall's own South Church. On Good Friday, the congregation's sexton "was prevailed upon to Ring the Bell and open the door" for a Church of England

II, granted "liberty of conscience" to all subjects, but especially to those who were "conformable to the rights of the Church of England." This was an unwelcome development in the eyes of New England Puritans, who had extended little religious tolerance to other dissenting Protestant sects. Trumbull Papers, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, fifth series, vol. 9 (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1885), 150. See David S. Lovejoy, *The Glorious Revolution in America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 179-95.

650. Edward Randolph, *Edward Randolph; Including His Letters and Official Papers from the New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies in America*, vol. 4. (Boston, MA: The Prince Society, 1899), 88, 132; Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 137, 141.

service.⁶⁵¹ Although Andros did not evict the Puritan congregation from their building, the Anglicans continued to convene services there for the next two years.

Sewall and his fellow congregants were dismayed to have their meeting house appropriated for the very “Common-Prayer Worship” many had left England to avoid. The arrangement was also strained for practical reasons: moving two congregations in and out of the building for a total of four services on Sundays was no easy feat, particularly if either congregation observed communion. On Easter Sunday, the inaugural attempt to share the South Church led to a disorderly scene. Delayed by “the Sacrament and Mr. Clark’s long sermon,” Sewall wrote, the Anglicans’ first service tarried past two in the afternoon. “[W]e were [appointed] to come 1/2 hour past one,” he continued, “so ’twas a sad Sight to see how full the Street was with people gazing and moving to and fro because had not entrance into the House.”⁶⁵² Seven weeks later, when the Puritans’ own observance of communion coincided with Whit Sunday (Pentecost), the South Church elders conveyed advanced notice of their plans to the Anglican wardens, hoping for accommodation. Instead, the wardens issued instructions to “leave off by 12 and not return again till [the Anglicans] rung the Bell,” a reply so discouraging the Puritans opted to forgo communion. The arrangement, Sewall complained, gave the Anglicans “the advantage to lengthen or shorten their Exercises so as may make for their purpose.”⁶⁵³ As Andros made clear the following June, when the South Church lingered over communion,

651. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 171. See also Mary Lou Lustig, *The Imperial Executive in America: Sir Edmund Andros, 1637-1714* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 157-69; Randolph, *Edward Randolph*, 4: 152.

652. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 172.

653. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 177.

this advantage was only for the Church of England. Sewall, who arrived home from the morning service at “just about a quarter past 12 by the Dial,” described Andros’ initial response to the fifteen-minute delay. “Governor angry that had done so late, and caused their Bell to be rung about a quarter past one; ’twas rather more before the Bell had done: So ’twas about a quarter past Three before our Afternoon Bell Rung about 1 1/2 hour later than usual.”⁶⁵⁴ Shortly thereafter—despite protests from the South Church’s elders—Andros altered the Sunday schedule substantially so that the Church of England convened its morning service first.

Sewall measured the Church of England’s advantage and his own congregation’s inconvenience by consulting a private sundial and clock, but few seventeenth-century churchgoers had access to such luxuries. The vast majority of Boston’s inhabitants gauged the time by attending to meeting house bells. On Sundays, one or more of these bells rang at five in the morning and nine in the evening in addition to ringing for religious services.⁶⁵⁵ Most churchgoers, then, were summoned to worship hours after last being apprised of the time. But they could not simply drop everything at the bell’s sound and tear through the streets; traveling to public worship required different decorum than responding to a fire alarm. Consequently, the bell that preceded religious services sounded not only to alert churchgoers in their respective homes but also to measure the time until the service commenced. In towns, like Boston, this was commonly achieved by either sounding the bell twice for relatively short durations, separated by an interval of

654. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 216.

655. *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* (Boston, various dates), 7: 97, 154, 200. In the 1680s, a bell also rang at eleven in the morning on weekdays.

roughly a quarter-hour, or by ringing the bell continuously for fifteen to twenty minutes.⁶⁵⁶ In outlying areas, where traveling clergy supplied pulpits intermittently and audiences responded across greater distances, the bell often gave at least an hour's notice and summoned congregants in stages. In areas with rough terrain or other obstacles, the intermission between first and second bells could be even longer. In St. Helena Parish, South Carolina, where inhabitants had to traverse sea islands to reach the church, the Church of England sexton tolled the first bell for the morning service at nine o'clock, the second bell at ten o'clock, and then rang the bell from 10:45 until the minister entered the church. For the afternoon service, when parishioners waited nearby, the sexton rang the first bell at two o'clock, and rang a second bell from 2:45 until the minister's arrival.⁶⁵⁷

Because early religious societies wished to convene for public worship in an orderly fashion, they considered the geographical distribution of their members when purchasing a bell. Of primary concern was the bell's weight, which determined its cost and was perceived to correspond closely to the distance its sound would carry.⁶⁵⁸ Local officials in Augusta, Georgia, petitioned colonial trustees in 1751 for a larger bell, a year after erecting the parish's first church. The largest bell available in Charleston, they

656. The congregation of King's Chapel (Boston's first Anglican church, erected during Andros' governorship) switched from the first to the second method in 1727. Formerly, their sexton was instructed to ring the "last Bell" for each service at a particular time. After 1727, he was instructed to ring continuously from 8:45 to 9:00 on Sunday mornings and, again, from 1:45 until 2:00 on Sunday afternoons. Henry Wilder Foote, *Annals of King's Chapel from the Puritan Age of New England to the Present Day* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1882), 1: 204, 336.

657. A. S. Salley, ed. *Minutes of the Vestry of St. Helena's Parish, South Carolina, 1726-1812* (Columbia, SC: Printed for the Historical Commission of South Carolina by the State Company, 1919), 171. These rules were instituted January 1785.

658. For a detailed negotiation of a bell's weight in relation to the range of its audibility, see Thomas Jefferson's correspondence pertaining to the purchase of a bell for the University of Virginia in 1825. Thomas Jefferson, "The Jefferson Papers," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Seventh Series, Vol. 1 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1900), 344, 347, 374-75.

reported, had proved to be “of small benefit” to many inhabitants, who lived “at too great a Distance from the Church.” A bell of approximately 200 wt. (224 pounds) would address the need, they estimated, but a bell this size was not to be found in the region.⁶⁵⁹ Farther north, in the settlement of Falmouth (now Portland, Maine), parishioners living at a distance strongly opposed the first parish’s purchase of an eight-hundred-pound bell. In a June 1758 diary entry, Thomas Smith, the parish minister, described a contentious meeting at which a majority of members voted to procure the bell, but the “out families” (those not inhabiting the “neck” or peninsula where the meeting house stood) “threatened never to come to meeting and talked of being set off a [separate] parish.”⁶⁶⁰ These families—who, according to Smith’s own estimate, comprised nearly half the parish—lived beyond the presumed range of the bell’s sound and would be excluded from its call to assemble.⁶⁶¹ Here it is worth mentioning that, at the time of the controversy, the “out families” and other parishioners had been assembling to hear Smith’s sermons for three decades—without a bell. How Falmouth’s first parish convened services before acquiring a bell is uncertain, but the situation was not unusual. Some congregations gathered to the sound of a drum, horn, or conch shell, and others raised a flag.⁶⁶² Always, the purpose of signaling was to assemble a scattered audience (or

659. Candler, ed., *Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 26: 299.

660. Thomas Smith, *Extracts from the Journals Kept by the Rev. Thomas Smith*, edited by Samuel Freeman (Portland, ME: Thomas Todd, 1821), 71.

661. *Ibid.*, 58. Smith took stock of the geographic distribution of families in his parish in December 1753.

662. In 1734, for example, the inhabitants of Sunderland, Massachusetts, which did not have a bell for its meeting house until at least 1754, voted to pay “Widow Root” an annual sum for “tending the Flagg on the Sabbath days, and on other occasions.” John Montague Smith, *1673-1899: History of the Town of Sunderland, Massachusetts*, edited by Henry Walbridge Taft and Abbie Talitha Montague (Greenfield, MA: E. A. Hall & Company, 1899), 497. For more on alternate methods of assembling congregations and additional examples, see Wilkes Allen, *The History of Chelmsford: From Its Origin in 1653, to the Year*

viewership) for public worship, and congregations modified the signal to meet this end as communities expanded. In many cases, the answer was to purchase a bell or upgrade to a larger bell. In Newbury, Massachusetts, however, parishioners living at a distance from the west meeting house (which had a bell) successfully petitioned for a flag “to be put out at the ringing of the first bell and taken in when the last bell is rung.”⁶⁶³

Many congregations who gathered to the sound of a drum or other instrument did so because bells were expensive and difficult to acquire, but certain religious sects renounced bells for ideological reasons. Quaker George Keith famously exhorted other dissenting sects to look to the example of the earliest Christians, who, he explained, “had no Hour-glass to measure out the Time unto them, nor an outward Bell hanging in a Steeple, to call them together, but the Gospel-Bell did ring and sound in their Hearts.”⁶⁶⁴ Baptists and Methodists were also known for places of worship unadorned with steeples or bells, although both denominations grew more accommodating toward the end of the eighteenth century. The relaxing standards of Rhode Island Baptists did not go unnoticed by Ezra Stiles, minister of Newport’s Second Congregational Church. In November 1775,

1820 (Haverhill, MA: P. N. Green, 1820), 145; Henry Taylor Blake, *Chronicles of New Haven Green from 1638 to 1862* (New Haven, CT: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1898), 19, 82; Frances Manwaring Caulkins, *History of New London, Connecticut, from the First Survey of the Coast in 1612 to 1860* (New London, CT: H. D. Utley, 1895), 76n2, 110; Elbridge H. Goss, “Early Bells of Massachusetts,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (April 1874), 177; Thomas Lechford, *Plain Dealing or News from New England*, edited by J. Hammond Trumbull (Boston: J. K. Wiggin & William Parsons Lunt, 1867), 44n48; Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 61-68; James Russell Trumbull, *History of Northampton Massachusetts from Its Settlement in 1654*, vol. 1 (Northampton, MA: Gazette Printing Company, 1898), 378; John Winthrop, *The Winthrop Papers*, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, sixth series, vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1892), 383.

663. John J. Currier, *History of Newbury, Mass., 1635-1902*, vol. 1 (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1902), 333. The vote to supplement the bell with a flag happened at a town meeting in November 1697.

664. George Keith, *The Presbyterian and Independent Visible Churches in New-England and Else-Where* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1689 [Evans no. 472]), 168-69.

three years after commenting that Baptists “would as soon erect a Crucifix as a Bell” on their meetinghouses, Stiles remarked on the “costly” and “highly ornamented” Baptist meetinghouse—complete with a “most lofty steeple”—newly erected in Providence: “This Denomination have greatly changed their Taste. Ten years ago they would not have suffered a Steeple or Bell to their Meetinghouses.”⁶⁶⁵ Francis Asbury, who traveled far and wide to spread Methodism, considered bells “contrary to the simplicity of Christ,” and he wished ill will to a cracked specimen he discovered at a Methodist church in Augusta, Georgia: “may it break! It is the first I ever saw in a house of ours in America: I hope it will be the last.”⁶⁶⁶

At the time of the Revolution, the churchgoing bell (before it was known as the churchgoing bell) could be heard in many British American communities, calling Christians of various denominations to assemble for services. Those listeners who responded by leaving their homes and traveling to join other members of their faith in public worship, comprised the bell’s primary audience. The churchgoing bell of course had other audiences, because the bell that called one congregation to service was heard by everyone. The churchgoing bell’s message and meaning on a given occasion were dependent on both listener and context. The sound could be a summons, a welcome (or unwelcome) reminder of a religious group’s presence in the community, a means of

665. Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 199, 634.

666. Francis Asbury, *The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church: From August 7, 1771, to December 7, 1815* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, 1821), 3: 210, 350. Methodist meetinghouses were to be built “plain and decent” and “not more expensively than is absolutely unavoidable.” See Methodist Episcopal Church, *A Form of Discipline, for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Elizabeth-Town, NJ: Shepard Kollock, 1788 [Evans no. 21253]), 35.

monitoring another religious society's activities, or an indication of the time. In each case, listeners associated the sound with the assembly of a particular congregation.

Misery in the City of New York

Only four of the original thirteen colonies did not recognize an established church (either the Church of England or another Protestant sect) or support it through public taxes. All regulated behavior on Sundays, and a majority compelled church attendance through fines, arrests, or corporal punishment. Early Jamestown settlers who failed to respond when the Church of England's bell summoned to public worship (twice each day) faced increasingly severe penalties: loss of the day's allowance for the first offense, whipping for the second, and six months of labor in the galleys for the third. In Massachusetts, where Puritan Congregationalism enjoyed privileged status, a network of tithingmen monitored church attendance and violators could be arrested or fined. At the time of the Revolution, roughly half of the colonies had laws compelling church attendance. In the wake of disestablishment, churches turned to the power of persuasion to fill pews. At the same time, Americans deliberated the First Amendment's implications for religious practice. In a nation that respected no religious establishment and extended the free exercise of religion to all, what did the Sabbath mean and how should it be observed?⁶⁶⁷ For answers and inspiration, Americans looked to—and in some cases

667. Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 24-51, 119-45, 182-90; Michael W. McConnell, "Establishment and Disestablishment at the Founding, Part I: Establishment of Religion," *William and Mary Law Review* 44, no. 5 (2003) 2105-2208; Alexis McCrossen, "Sabbatarianism: The Intersection of Church and State in the Orchestration of Everyday Life in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Religious and Secular Reform in America: Ideas, Beliefs, and Social Change*, edited by David Keith Adams and Cornelis A. van Minnen

invented—the past. A nascent Sabbatarian movement, Alexis McCrossen has contended, advocated a return to “the traditional Sabbath,” a myth spun from Puritan religious convictions and “the invented tradition of European settlers.”⁶⁶⁸ A larger myth that arose from the confusion of disestablishment, Steven K. Green has argued, was the “Christian-nation myth,” which revised and sanctified America’s founding moments.⁶⁶⁹ This is when Americans began to publicly articulate conflicting understandings of the churchgoing bell’s purpose, its audience, and its message.

The earliest public exchange (that I have found) transpired in the final week of July 1820, when a distraught French traveller aired his frustrations with city noise to the editor of New York’s *National Advocate*.⁶⁷⁰ “La Carmagnole” had traveled to America “pour liberte e tranquility”—to escape the state of “grand confusion” in France. Since arriving in the New York, however, he had been assailed by a profusion of noises. At dawn, he had awakened to “de grand tappage” of chimney sweeps offering their services (“singing ver loud Sweep—Sweep”). The subsequent delivery of “de lait—de milk vat you drink in de coffee” had prevented him from returning to sleep, and a chorus of vendors, hawking goods and services (“Ot Korn—Ot Korn. Vat de diable is Ot Korn?”), had persisted throughout the day and into the evening. The incessant banging, shouting,

(New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999), esp. 142; Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Edgar J. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process, 1620-1692* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 45-49; William Strachey, *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia. Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall, &c.* (London: 1612), 10.

668. McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday*, 22.

669. Green, *Second Disestablishment*, esp. 91-103.

670. This is the earliest instance I have found of a public complaint followed by a public response. Unanswered complaints about the use of bells for various purposes, including for assembling congregations, were published earlier. See S., “To the Editor of the Federal Gazette, *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 29 May 1790, [2].

singing, and clanging, La Carmagnole feared, would drive him “to de hospital, vat you shall call de mad house”—or perhaps back to troubled France.⁶⁷¹

The grand confusion in France in the summer of 1820 was all too real: a day before La Carmagnole’s letter appeared in the *National Advocate*, Paris papers had arrived in New York, bearing news of political turmoil and rioting.⁶⁷² La Carmagnole himself, however, was the fabrication of Mordecai M. Noah, playwright, former diplomat, and editor of the *National Advocate*.⁶⁷³ Noah’s satirical letter (addressed to himself) resonated with political allies and adversaries alike, circulating widely in the following weeks and even inspiring another fictional French refugee to pen a related complaint to the editor of Boston’s *Daily Advertiser*. (After hearing that Bostonians were “one very quiet, religieux peoples” who “no cry de ot-corn,” “One Malheureux

671. La Carmagnole, “To the Editor of the National Advocate,” *New York National Advocate*, 25 July 1820, [2].

672. The newspaper accounts in question described the Paris riots of June 3, 1820. The unrest attended debates in the Chambers of Deputies and Peers regarding a controversial law, which added an additional 172 deputies to the chambers, effectively giving wealthy legislators a double vote. The same Paris newspapers also included transcripts from the June 5-7 trial of Louis Pierre Louvel, who had assassinated Charles Ferdinand, Duke of Berry, in February 1820. See “France,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 24 July 1820, [2]; “New York, July 24, 1820,” *New York National Advocate*, 24 July 1820, [2]; “Disturbances in France,” *New York National Advocate*, 24 July 1820, [2]; “Translated for the Commercial Advertiser,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 25 July 1820, [2].

673. Named for a popular song and dance associated with working class revolutionaries in France (and Jeffersonian Republicans in America), La Carmagnole had much in common with other “Frenchmen” of Noah’s creation: the character of “La Role” in Noah’s 1819 play, “She Would Be a Soldier,” and “Monsieur La Blond,” a fabricated textile merchant from Paris who corresponded with the editor of the *National Advocate* on multiple occasions and, in 1825, was challenged to a duel by another fictional character. See La Blond, “For Le Avocat Nationale,” *New York National Advocate*, 27 May 1818, [2]; La Blond, “For the Avocat Nationale,” *Providence Patriot* (from the *New York National Advocate*), 21 March 1821, [2]; “Duel, Challenge, &c.,” *Middletown Middlesex Gazette* (from the *New York National Advocate*), 27 April 1825, [2]; Mordecai Manuel Noah, “She Would Be a Soldier; Or, The Plains of Chippewa,” in *Representative Plays by American Dramatists*, 629-78, edited by Montrose J. Moses (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1918). On the significance of “La Carmagnole” to Republicans and Federalists circa 1794-95, see Myron Gray, “French Revolutionary Song for Federal Philadelphia,” *Common-Place* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2013). <http://www.common-place.org/vol-13/no-02/gray/>; Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 145-47, 177-78.

Frenchman” ventured north—only to discover that Boston’s bells rang throughout the day and watchmen interrupted sleep throughout the night.⁶⁷⁴) In New York, William Coleman, editor of the *Evening Post*, set aside multiple ongoing disputes with Noah to reprint La Carmagnole’s “just lamentation,” appending his own denunciation of a comparable “misery” suffered by city dwellers on Sundays: the “perpetual clattering discords of a dozen deafening bells of different sizes and tones.” Bell ringing, Coleman asserted, made “no part of devotion.” As currently practiced, it annoyed a majority of inhabitants and, worse, it imposed cruelly on listeners confined to sick beds.⁶⁷⁵

Why should not this custom, though long established, be so regulated as to answer the principal object intended and be confined to that? What more can be reasonably intended than to notify the different congregations of the time to begin their devotions? Surely, for this purpose 10 or 15 minutes, once, is amply sufficient. Why then should every bell in town be set a-ringing at 8 o’clock every Sunday morning, and again at 9; and again at 10; and the same thing be repeated at mid-day, and as often at evening lectures?⁶⁷⁶

In a carefully crafted rejoinder, Noah, a prominent member of the city’s Jewish community, began by suggesting that Coleman lacked the piety to appreciate why bell ringing was required for religious devotion. Noah then lampooned a manner of

674. One Malheureux Frenchman [One Unhappy Frenchman], “To de Precentair of de Daily Advertisseur,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 8 September 1820, [2]. The following newspapers reprinted La Carmagnole’s complaint: *New York Evening Post*, 25 July 1820, [2]; *Poulson’s Philadelphia American Daily Advertiser*, 27 July 1820, [2]; “Picture of New-York,” *City of Washington Gazette*, 28 July 1820, [3]; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 29 July 1820, [2]; *Boston Repertory*, 29 July 1820, [2]; *Philadelphia National Recorder*, 5 August 1820, 95; *Washington Metropolitan*, 10 August 1820, [4]; *Providence Gazette*, 14 August 1820, [4]; *Concord New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, 19 September 1820, [4]; *Worcester National Aegis*, 27 September 1820, [4]; *Newport Rhode-Island Republican*, 27 September 1820, [4].

675. “The Miseries of the City of New-York,” *New York Evening Post*, 25 July 1820, [2].

676. *Ibid.*, [2].

performance New Yorkers associated with the bells of a particular steeple—“that scientific ring of Trinity Church, which is played upon by note, and with about two seconds of space between each chime, mangling sundry elegant hymns, and jangling for an half hour after service has commenced.” He concluded by referring the matter of necessity to another group of religious outsiders: “The Turks have no bells in their minarets,” Noah remarked, “giving as a reason that they disturb the solemnity of devotion; but how should the Turks know anything?”⁶⁷⁷

This relatively amicable exchange between Coleman and Noah (professional and political adversaries who seldom agreed on anything) was typical of how early opposition manifested to the sound of church bells assembling congregations for religious services. Detractors lobbied to abbreviate the practice, rather than pressing to abolish it entirely, and they annexed their complaints to timely conversations about related issues and comparable annoyances (in this case, the unwelcome clamor of street commerce). Even at this early date, however, Coleman and Noah’s arguments anticipated the scope of later opposition. Both editors found the Sunday habits of New York congregations out of keeping with what they conceived to be the churchgoing bell’s primary function: assembling a select audience of churchgoers for religious services. Coleman argued that the ringing carried on longer than necessary to achieve this end, and Noah pointed out

677. “Bells,” *New York National Advocate*, 26 July 1820, [2]. Noah’s shrewd response to Coleman allowed him to agree in spirit (that ringing on Sundays was excessive and annoying) without personally conceding that a longstanding Christian tradition was unnecessary. Before editing the *National Advocate*, Noah had lost a diplomatic post as the US Consul in Tunis on account of his faith. See Mordecai M. Noah, *Travels in England, France, Spain, and the Barbary States, in the Years 1813-14 and 15* (New York, NY: Kirk and Mercein, 1819), esp. 376-80. Judging by the locations of his funeral service and burial, Coleman was an Episcopalian. “From the N. Y. Evening Post of Tuesday,” *Baltimore Patriot*, 15 July 1829, [2].

that the cumbersome tune-playing from Trinity Church's steeple persisted well after religious services were underway. In subsequent disputes, unhappy listeners advocated on behalf of additional audiences, whom the churchgoing bell harmed or annoyed for many reasons and in many ways, but complainants strayed very little from this understanding of how the churchgoing bell should work and what it should accomplish: its purpose was to summon, and its audience was the faithful congregation whose service impended.

A week after appending the churchgoing bell to "La Carmagnole's" inventory of offending sounds, William Coleman took another opportunistic swing at the practice, this timely interjecting the issue into an ongoing dispute over funeral bells in Boston (an episode addressed in Chapter 3). After reprinting a physician's passionate plea to suppress funeral tolling, Coleman pointed out that funeral bells had been silent in New York for decades. He had reprinted the physician's letter, Coleman explained, to stress his dissatisfaction with another "unreasonable custom": "[T]oo much prevails here on Sundays and Sunday evenings," he declared, "with scarcely a half-hour's interval in behalf of the sick."⁶⁷⁸ Perhaps Coleman's agitating worked. Several months later, when New York's funeral tolling ordinance came before the Common Council for yearly approval, a new clause had been added for consideration: on Sundays, churches would be prohibited from ringing their bells more than one hour before the commencement of a service. After sitting on the proposed amendment for three months, the Common Council

678. "Bells," *New York Evening Post*, 3 August, 1820, [2].

voted it down, with eight in favor and ten against. But the issued had been officially opened for discussion.⁶⁷⁹

When the churchgoing bell again came under New Yorkers' scrutiny, in May 1825, appeals to restrict the duration of ringing were more insistent. Although Coleman did not instigate this uprising, he was quick to reprint calls for reform and add his own voice to the protest. Once again, Coleman measured the churchgoing bell's utility by how effectively it assembled congregants for religious services. This time, though, he argued that the protracted ringing characteristic of Sundays in New York left potential churchgoers in a "continuous state of uncertainty, as to what is or is not church time." Ten or fifteen minutes was sufficient for the summons, he insisted. A "ding-dong of an hour's length, six or seven times every Sunday," was unnecessary, annoying, and even confusing.⁶⁸⁰ Coleman's concern was shared by listeners in communities much smaller than New York; in fact, three years earlier, representatives from different Congregational churches in Newburyport, Massachusetts, had persuaded the editor of the *Newburyport Herald* to address the disorder arising from the "incessant noise of bells for many hours" on Sundays. At present, the resulting editorial had explained, the various parishes summoned their members at different times, which led to confusion. Listeners were "liable to mistake the time, to reach the church too early or too late." Further, the staggered summonses and the activity they instigated disrupted worship. "As matters are now arranged," the editorial explained, "the worshippers in one church are no sooner

679. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831* (New York, 1917), 11: 386, 401, 521.

680. "Ringling of Bells," *New York Evening Post*, 18 May 1825, [2].

engaged in devotion than they are molested with the bells of some other church; while the members of the latter have their attention drawn away from their pastor's discourse by the sight of persons returning home from neighboring churches.”⁶⁸¹ What the Newburyport inhabitants had proposed in 1822 was coordination between parishes, so that town's four congregations would be summoned to service at the same time. Coleman, of course, recommended that the duration of ringing to assemble New York congregations be “materially moderated,” from the current “hour's length” down to ten or fifteen minutes.⁶⁸²

Coleman's estimate of the current duration of ringing were so off-base, in the opinion of one subscriber, that the record had to be put straight. *Ringin*, CIVIS contended (adhering to a technical definition of the word), occupied no more than two hours on Sundays, and that was distributed over almost twelve hours, between eight o'clock in the morning and eight o'clock at night. Before services, most churches rang their bells for only twenty to thirty minutes, and then *tolled* the bells for ten minutes, immediately before worship commenced. The ringing that preceded the ten minutes of tolling, he clarified, was performed with “occasional strokes” that were “generally few and far between.”⁶⁸³ It is difficult to compare CIVIS' estimates with an “average” duration of the churchgoing bell in American communities in 1825. Ringing (and/or tolling) a bell for thirty to forty minutes before services, however, exceeded the durations permitted by recently enacted ordinances in other communities. Salem, Massachusetts,

681. “Time of Public Worship,” *Newburyport (Mass.) Herald*, 15 March 1822, [3].

682. “Ringin of Bells,” *New York Evening Post*, 18 May 1825, [2].

683. CIVIS, “For the New-York Evening Post,” *New York Evening Post*, 25 May 1825, [2].

had limited the use of bells before public worship service accordingly in 1823: three minutes of ringing an hour before the service, then three minutes of ringing, four minutes of rest, and four minutes of tolling immediately before service commenced.⁶⁸⁴ In 1824, Boston had implemented a rule of ringing for five minutes, pausing for ten, and tolling for five.⁶⁸⁵

Although CIVIS diligently accounted for all the ringing and tolling heard in New York on Sundays, he did not directly address Coleman's larger argument—that the duration of ringing on Sundays could be drastically reduced and still effectively assemble congregations. Instead, CIVIS elaborated an alternative understanding of the churchgoing bell's purpose.

It gives an air of cheerfulness to the day which was mercifully designed for the comfort of man, and for those sacred exercises whose natural effect upon his pious mind must be the excitement of feelings of gratitude, love and joy. It seems as a remembrancer of the sanctity of the day; and, to mark the progress of its hours, that all proper arrangements may be duly and truly made, to admit of attention to its sacred duties.⁶⁸⁶

Marking the progress of the day's hours to "admit of attention to its sacred duties" is, of course, a roundabout argument that the churchgoing bell's sound facilitates participation in public worship (assuming that public worship constitutes at least some of the "sacred duties" CIVIS had in mind). To evoke "an air of cheerfulness" and serve "as a

684. "Ringing and Tolling the Bells," *Salem Essex Register*, 10 April 1823, [1].

685. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1824, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 2: 51, 57, 516. This order was rescinded in August 1825. Summary Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, 1824, Boston City Council Proceedings, City of Boston Archives, 3: 284.

686. *Ibid.*, [2].

remembrancer” of the day’s sanctity, however, transcend the limited work of summoning. Similarly, the audience CIVIS imagines, a piously-minded (hu)man(kind), surpasses a specific religious congregation.

In response to the concerns raised by Coleman and others over the duration of ringing on Sundays, New York’s Common Council ordered a committee to look into regulating the use of all bells in the city.⁶⁸⁷ What happened next as been addressed at some length in Chapter 4: officers of New York churches perceived a threat in the Common Council’s decision to consider regulating church bells. If the city imposed restrictions on ringing for religious services, they countered, the sextons would not ring for fires. In December, a destructive fire burned for almost an hour before any church bells took up the alarm, and the Common Council called for an investigation to determine the extent to which church officials were involved in the sextons’ conspiracy. In the lively public discussion that ensued, recommendations progressed from eliminating sextons, to eliminating church bells from the fire alarm system, to eliminating bell ringing altogether. This prompted the bishop of New York’s Episcopal diocese (writing as “A Friend to Old Customs”) to pen a spirited defense of the churchgoing bell. “It is the immemorial custom of every Christian nation to announce the hours of public worship by the ringing of bells,” John H. Hobart began, “thus reminding the community of the great duty of worshipping their Divine Benefactor and Father.” (In an earlier draft of the letter

687. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831* (New York, 1917), 14: 550.

Hobart had described the immemorial custom as “reminding the community *at large*.”⁶⁸⁸ Christian churches “in every age and country” had sounded bells to call their members to assemble and “mark the ‘holy hours of prayer,’” Hobart continued. In communities across the nation, the churchgoing bell “proclaim[ed] the religious sense of the community, and remind[ed] the careless and indifferent of their duty.” It was a religious right, he noted, that even “the strong monarchy of England” recognized.⁶⁸⁹

In referencing an ahistorical past to justify the churchgoing bell’s present use, Hobart articulated a defense that advocates of the practice would increasingly turn to in subsequent decades. Since before written record, the churchgoing bell had announced the hours of public worship, and marked the hours of prayer; in the present, it called Christians to assemble, reminded “the careless and indifferent” of their Christian obligations, and proclaimed “the religious sense” of the larger community. Hobart acknowledged the churchgoing bell’s use for calling Christians “to assemble at the temples of the Most High.” Like CIVIS, however, Hobart did not directly address the necessity or efficacy of this use. In addition to specific congregations, comprised of faithful listeners, Hobart outlined the churchgoing bell’s relationship to a more general audience of “the careless and indifferent,” for whom the churchgoing bell should serve as a reminder of Christian duties. This is the audience the churchgoing bell’s advocates increasingly desired to reach in later decades. Finally, by alluding to the “strong

688. Morgan Dix, ed., *A History of the Parish of Trinity Church in the City of New York*, vol. 4 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), 3 (emphasis added).

689. A Friend of Old Customs, “To the Editors of the *New York American*,” *New York American*, 30 December 1825, [2].

monarchy of England,” Hobart wedded his vision of the churchgoing bell’s present purposes to the widely accepted (and, Steven K. Green has argued, newly discovered) story of America’s founding as a Christian nation.⁶⁹⁰ The larger community whose “religious sense” the churchgoing bell proclaimed was not only New York, but also the nation.

Timbre and Tune-Playing

As Americans disputed the churchgoing bell’s purpose, meaning, and audiences, they also evaluated the pleasantness of its sound. Listeners’ aesthetic expectations were shaped by regular exposure to local performances, and both bell technology and sounding conventions changed over time. Mordecai Noah’s July 1820 sendup of cumbersome tune-playing from the steeple of Trinity Church, for example, was something New Yorkers would have understood only after September 1797, when the eight bells—the first ring in the city—were installed.⁶⁹¹ The apparatus for laboriously pecking out hymns “by note... with about two seconds of space between each chime,” was quite likely a later modification. A newspaper account of the bells’ debut performance reported that the ringers had “exerted their skill much to the satisfaction of a large concourse of people,” suggesting that the bells were initially sounded by change ringing.⁶⁹² The earliest report of tune-playing (that I have found) dates to New York’s September 1813 celebration of Commodore Perry’s victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, when a band played “Yankey

690. Green, *Second Disestablishment*.

691. “Bells,” *New York National Advocate*, 26 July 1820, [2].

692. “On Monday afternoon the new Bells of Trinity church were put in motion for the first time...” *Diary and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 September 1797, [3].

Doodle” and “the bells of Trinity Church also chimed the same enlivening tune.”⁶⁹³

Whether the churchgoing bell’s sound was sweet or strident, whether it was musical or annoying, remained a central issue in later disputes. In 1876, the rector and vestry of Mark’s Church insisted, to the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, that the chiming of its bells was not “harsh, loud, high, sharp, clanging and discordant” as the church’s neighbors had complained, but “musical, mellow, soft, well-pitched, sweet and harmonious.”⁶⁹⁴ These evaluations reflected decades of developments inside belfries and ringing chambers.

The timbre or tone color of bells became a more frequent topic of discussion after the Revolution, when buying a bell locally came to be seen as a more viable alternative to importing a bell from England. Before the Revolution, American bell makers seldom invited direct comparisons between the quality of their own products and that of European imports, choosing instead to emphasize advantages in price and convenience. When domestic bell makers did advertise the quality of their bells, it was often accompanied by a claim to expertise acquired in Europe. Henry Crane of Stoughton, Massachusetts, for example, promised in May 1770 to make bells “equal to” those imported and “much cheaper” with the assistance of a bell founder “lately from England, but last from Philadelphia.”⁶⁹⁵ Even after domestic foundries began advertising the quality

693. “New -York, September 25,” *New-York Gazette*, 25 September 1813, [2].

694. *Report of Harrison et al. vs. St. Mark's Church, Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott., 1877), 14.

695. “A Bell-Foundry,” *Boston Gazette*, 14 May 1770, [3].

of their own work as “equal to” or “far exceeding” imports, skepticism remained.⁶⁹⁶ “We praise Revere's Bells more when we first have them than afterwards,” William Bentley remarked in April 1818. “They have not yet been distinguished for their sweetness. A Bell of 900 lbs. has been carried to Durham, N. H. They venture to prefer it to any imported bell and so did we, but from patriotism.”⁶⁹⁷ At the time Bentley entered this critique in his diary, he had been listening to (and commenting on) Revere’s bells for more than twenty-five years, beginning with a bell cast for Boston’s North Brick meeting house in 1792: “The sound is not clear & prolonged, from the lips to the crown shrill.”⁶⁹⁸ Bentley had a substantial basis for comparison, because he listened to bells wherever he went: on the many occasions when he visited Boston from his home in nearby Salem, and when he traveled through New England, stopping at meeting houses along the way. Bentley consistently described the sound of bells he admired as sharp, clear, sweet, prolonged, and in tune—qualities he found lacking in the tone of Revere’s bells.⁶⁹⁹ Comments issued by judges at an 1837 Massachusetts exhibition lend credence to Bentley’s evaluation. When awarding a diploma to a slightly out-of-tune bell entered by George Holbrook, they described its tone as “not unlike the Bells formerly cast by Paul Revere, & Son, of this City, having, however, this advantage, that, after being struck, the

696. “Church Bells; of a Superior Workmanship”, (New Haven, CT: 1800 January 20). Early American Imprints, Series I. [no. 38058].

697. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Salem, Mass., 1907), 4: 512 (quotation). Bentley penned a similar entry in 1809 about a bell Revere cast for a church in Newport: “It is happy that the Bell foundry of our Country was employed” (3: 484).

698. *Ibid.*, 1: 395.

699. *Ibid.*, 2: 363, 369, 374, 376-77, 3:484. When Bentley’s own congregation purchased a Revere bell, he recorded no assessment of its sound on the day it was hung or any time after.

tone diminishes smoothly to the end, while Mr. Revere's gave a waving tone, like that produced by two instruments, not exactly in tune with each other."⁷⁰⁰

In this dissertation, I approach both noise and music as auditory, rather than acoustic phenomena; consonance and dissonance are matters left to listeners. That said, a (very) brief explanation of why the judges found Holbrook's bell slightly-out-of-tune will illuminate complaints examined later in this chapter. When a listener perceives a musical note, that note consists of a fundamental frequency plus many partial frequencies, which are higher than the fundamental. When a violin string is plucked, the partials are integer multiples of the fundamental. Because of the way it is shaped, a bell vibrates differently than a violin string: some of its partials are integer multiples, but others are not. To complicate matters, a bell's partials decay at different rates after it is struck. Generally, the higher partials die away quickly, and the lowest partial takes longest to decay. The most prominent partial to a listener, however, is not the lowest partial, but the one above it. According to the judges at the 1837 exhibition, the lowest partial of Holbrook's bell was a semitone higher (just shy of an integer multiple) than it should be, and the resulting clash with the higher partials made his bell sound out of tune.⁷⁰¹ When multiple bells sound in quick succession, as is the case with change ringing and chime performances (addressed in Chapter 2), partials from different notes are heard concurrently, and

700. "Reports of the Judges," in *First Exhibition and Fair of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, at Faneuil and Quincy Halls, in the City of Boston, September 18, 1837* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1837), 40.

701. "Reports of the Judges," 40. For more sophisticated explanations of bell acoustics, see William A. Hibbert, "The Quantification of Strike Pitch and Pitch Shifts in Church Bells" (PhD dissertation, Open University, 2008); Percival Price, "Bell (i): Timbre and Tuning." Grove Music Online, 2008.

opportunities multiply for these partials to clash. It is especially important for the bells of chimes and carillons to be precisely-tuned, individually and in relation to each other, because slightly-out-of-tune bells and their rogue partials are conspicuous to many (although not all) listeners if a recognizable melody is attempted.

If congregations and communities admired fine-toned bells with well-tuned partials, they especially valued rings and chimes, which were considered marks of status as well as sources of music. Before the Revolution, the only tower instruments with an octave of bells were three rings imported from England, which were funded through public subscription drives and hung in Anglican steeples: Christ Church in Boston, Christ Church in Philadelphia, and St. Michael's in Charleston. These bells were mounted on wheels for change ringing. All three churches contracted with a group of ringers, who rehearsed regularly and performed on designated occasions, including holy days, public holidays, and private funerals, as well as ringing before Sunday services.⁷⁰² In addition to approving press coverage and favorable personal accounts of performances, there is evidence of widespread interest in these instruments. For many years, the ringers of Christ Church in Philadelphia practiced weekly on the evenings before market days, and these events reportedly attracted sizable audiences.⁷⁰³ A stipulation in the 1750 contract

702. Mary Kent Davey Babcock, *Christ Church, Salem Street, Boston: The Old North Church of Paul Revere Fame: Historical Sketches, Colonial Period, 1723-1755* (Boston: T. Todd, 1947); Christ Church Archives, Vestry Minutes, 3 April 1758, 1: 156, Christ Church Archives, Philadelphia; Benjamin Dorr, *A Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia, from Its Foundation, A. D. 1695, to A. D. 1841* (New York, 1841), 111; Louis P. Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 231-32; Arthur Howard Nichols, "Christ Church Bells, Boston, Mass.," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Jan. 1904), 70-71; George W. Williams, *St. Michael's, Charleston, 1751-1951: With Supplements 1951-2001* (Columbia, S. C., 1951), 240-41, 252-57.

703. "Philadelphia, August 25," *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1779; "Historical. The First Chime of Bells in America," *Christian Recorder*, February 3, 1866. Regular concerts in Philadelphia on the evenings before market days are corroborated by the diary of Elizabeth Drinker as late

signed by Boston's bell ringers suggests that listeners wanted to *see* how the bells were sounded: the ringers promised to not "begg Money of any person in the tower."⁷⁰⁴ In Charleston, the income from allowing observers into the tower was lucrative enough to spark a public tiff, in the pages of the *South Carolina Gazette*, between the clerk and clock winder of St. Michael's. The clock winder accused the clerk of showing the ringers "to all comers" and pocketing the money. The clerk, in the subsequent issue of the *Gazette*, accused the clock winder of coveting the income himself and attempting to extort an allowance in exchange for remaining silent.⁷⁰⁵

Although the rings in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston were initially hung for change ringing, all three were subsequently retrofitted for chiming. This may have been desirable (or necessary) for several reasons. Rigging each bell to be struck with either its clapper or a hammer is gentler on the structure of towers than swinging the weight of the entire bell around to strike the clapper. A chime stand also enables one person to strike all the bells remotely, eliminating the need for a ringer to pull each rope, as well as an obligation to compensate each ringer.⁷⁰⁶ In addition to reducing dependency on multiple bell ringers, modifying a ring of bells for chiming enabled the performances so displeasing to Mordecai Noah: with an octave of stationary bells at his disposal, a chimer

as October of 1805. Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 3, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, 1991), 1872; Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 112.

704. Babcock, *Christ Church, Salem Street, Boston*, 193.

705. Williams, *St. Michael's, Charleston*, 252-56. The dispute in question transpired in April 1767.

706. The Reverend Henry Ellacombe, English campanologist and inventor of a popular chiming apparatus, worried about the "evil work" bell ringers got up to, out of sight in the ringing chamber. He considered eliminating "all dependence on ringers" to be a strong selling point of his device. Henry Thomas Ellacombe, *Chiming: An Appendix to the Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1860), 5-6.

could aspire to play recognizable tunes. This was a quality many listeners (Noah obviously excluded) mentioned when describing bell performances as “musical” or “melodious”—being able to identify a familiar melody. An April 1833 *Boston Transcript* commentary on the “proverbial” bells of Christ Church, for example, praised the skill of past performers, who had “played upon [the bells] with the same facility that an able organist touches the key of his favorite instrument,—producing with the nicest accuracy all the great variety of church music, which falls within the eight notes.”⁷⁰⁷ That said, listeners did not require a chime to perceive sweetness or music. “There is more melody and poetry in one rich-toned, heavy bell,” remarked a critic in September 1869, “than in all the chimes put together.”⁷⁰⁸

Charleston’s ring appears to have been the first modified for chiming, reportedly due to a shortage of ringers following the Revolution and the subsequent disuse and disrepair of the wheels. Parish historian, George W. Williams, estimated that a chiming apparatus was installed by 1790, based on purchases of a new chiming frame and rope in the years following the Revolution.⁷⁰⁹ Notices run in Charleston newspapers in September 1785 and April 1796 corroborate Williams’ estimate and may explain who was chiming in the absence of the former ringers. Posted by Gilbert Chalmers, a Charleston builder, the earlier notice offered a substantial reward for the return of a slave named Ben, trained as a carpenter and “accustomed to ring the New Church bells on Sundays for some years

707. “Christ Church,” *Newburyport Herald*, 23 April 1833, 1 (reprinted from the *Boston Transcript*).

708. “Courant Notes,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, 6 September 1869, 5.

709. Williams, *St. Michael’s, Charleston*, 304-05. the first “chimer” acknowledged in church records took up his post in 1837.

past.”⁷¹⁰ The April 1796 notice indicated that Ben, in the intervening years, had become “much accustomed to chiming the New Church Bells, especially on rejoicing days.”⁷¹¹ Possibly, after the initial group of ringers were reduced in numbers by the war, the work of chiming was thereafter delegated to slaves. Washington McLean Gadsden, the first chimer acknowledged in church records, was born into slavery and took up his post at the age of thirteen, in 1837.⁷¹²

Domestic bell makers made significant advances in the 1840s, stimulated in part by the “Black Tariff” of 1842, which levied a thirty-five percent duty on imported bells.⁷¹³ The Meneely foundry of West Troy, New York, successfully cast a single bell, pitched at D-natural, to replace the broken three-thousand-pound tenor bell in Trinity Church’s ring in 1846. Two years later, the Dyer foundry of Philadelphia produced the first domestically manufactured chime for St. Philip’s Episcopal Church of Charleston. Other bell makers quickly followed suit, and by the start of the Civil War listeners in sixteen additional cities and towns—dispersed geographically and ranging in size from Bath, Maine, to Cincinnati—could hear chimes.⁷¹⁴ Press accounts generally hailed the arrival of these instruments with enthusiasm. An expansive *Harper’s Weekly* feature on

710. Gilbert Chalmers, “Ten Guineas Reward,” *South-Carolina Gazette and the Public Advertiser*, 3 September 1785, [3].

711. Gilbert Chalmers, “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Charleston City Gazette*, 4 April 1796, [1]. Perhaps Ben’s second attempt to escape was successful. Roughly four months after offering a reward for Ben’s return, Chalmers began advertising for a house carpenter who could supervise others. Gilbert Chalmers, “WANTED IMMEDIATELY,” *Charleston City Gazette*, 24 September 1796, [3].

712. Williams, *St. Michael’s, Charleston*, 304.

713. Albert S. Bolles, *Industrial History of the United States, from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time* (Norwich, CT: Henry Bill Publishing Company, 1879), 350.

714. A total of eighteen chimes were installed during these years, but two of the chimes were in Philadelphia and Boston. Data from the Tower Directory maintained by the Guild of Carillonneurs in North America: <http://www.gcna.org/tower-directory.html>.

the chime acquired by Christ Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, expressed a hope that chimes would be embraced by the country, “for we can conceive of no better mode to usher in the Sabbath morn than the pealing of sweet-toned church-bells.”⁷¹⁵ John Sullivan Dwight, however, foresaw future turmoil upon receiving news of a proposed chime in nearby Lowell, Massachusetts. “[H]aving “chimes of an evening” might seem pleasantly poetic in the abstract, he warned readers of his weekly music journal, but in reality a number of factors could render the instrument’s presence a “chronic nuisance.” Nearby residents might be regularly subjected to unskilled performances (slowly hammered chorales or the “ding-dong-dinging psalm tunes and simple airs,” with the degree of torment moderated by tower height and the number of bells.⁷¹⁶

The Civil War brought dramatic changes to the contents of American belfries, especially in the South, where many churches gave up their bells to be melted into artillery. Roughly a year into the conflict, a masterfully crafted entreaty from General P. G. T. Beauregard to “the Planters of the Mississippi Valley” circulated in newspapers throughout the Confederacy. Beauregard directly asked only for plantation bells, but his request invoked centuries of tradition in which worthy, resolute, God-fearing Christians had “not hesitated to melt and mould into cannon the precious bells surmounting their houses of God, which had called generations to prayer.”⁷¹⁷ An appeal followed two weeks later from the Ordnance Bureau of the Confederate States, calling on all Southerners to

715. “Chime of Church-Bells,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 26 May 1860, 324-25.

716. John Sullivan Dwight, “From my Diary, No. 6,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 27 June 1857, 100.

717. “To the Planters of the Mississippi Valley,” *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, March 19, 1862;

demonstrate their patriotism by sending every bell that could be spared to one of eleven arsenals and depots.⁷¹⁸ Giving up a bell for artillery was not a decision Southern congregations made lightly. At a practical level, bells were expensive to replace, and divesting towers of bells could endanger public safety, since many communities used church bells for alerting firefighters. There was also the question of morality: should church bells be transformed into implements of death? L. W. Seeley, pastor of Richmond's Second Baptist Church, declined to have a proposed "church bell battery" named in his honor, saying "I should be loath to have my name 'make a noise in the world' through such a medium."⁷¹⁹ Many congregations, however, concluded with Paul Hamilton Hayne that investing "the metal of peaceful notes with death-compelling powers" was justified—that the Confederacy's cause was holy, and holy causes used "holy things."⁷²⁰ After bells arrived in the field as artillery, worshippers back home could read field correspondents' accounts of "the 'old church bells,' moulded into cannon," "howling" for a Yankee surrender.⁷²¹

Some Southern communities, like Griffin, Georgia, relinquished all their bells for artillery.

Others, like Macon, Georgia, kept at least one for fire alarms.⁷²² After the war, Southern

718. See "The Value of Church Bells," *Charleston Mercury*, April 3, 1862.

719. L. W. Seeley, "Second Baptist Church Bell," *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, April 5, 1862. See also "Patriotic Example," *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, April 1, 1862; A Lady of the Church, "The Church Bell Battery," *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, April 3, 1862.

720. Paul Hamilton Hayne, *Poems of Paul Hamilton Hayne* (Boston: Lothrop, 1882), 74-75.

721. "John Morgan's Late Raid into Kentucky," *Macon Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1863, [4]. For more on Southern congregations and communities relinquishing their bells, see Deborah Lubken, "Death Metal: American Tower Bells in War and Its Aftermath," presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Boston, May 2011.

722. Diarist Kate Cumming missed the "sound of the church-going bell" when she arrived in Griffin in March 1865, and was told that all the town's bells had been given to make cannon. Kate Cumming, *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1866), 265. On Macon's bells, see M. Jemison Chestney, "The Bells of Macon," *Georgia Review* 15, no. 4 (1961), 439-41, 443. The

congregations devoted scarce resources to replacing bells, even though the process was expensive and often slow. Most took at least two years to procure new bells.⁷²³ The war dramatically impacted the distribution of chiming for decades. The first domestic chime (St. Philip's Charleston) answered Beauregard's call. Seven of St. Michael's bells were either destroyed or lost, and the tenor bell, which remained in the steeple to ring for fires, cracked a few months after the war ended. After being shipped to London and recast, they were heard again from St. Michael's steeple in March 1867, the *Charleston Courier* reported, chiming "the familiar sounds of 'Home Again.'"⁷²⁴ While some Southern listeners went without the churchgoing bell's sound for years, Northern congregations acquired more chimes. Five Northern churches purchased chimes *during* the war, and by the end of 1875 more than forty-five additional chimes had been installed in Northern belfries. By comparison, Southern congregations did not begin making similar acquisitions until the 1880s.⁷²⁵



guard house bell sounded for 9 o'clock curfew as late as March of 1863. "Regular Meeting, Council Chamber, Mar. 10, 1863," *Macon Daily Telegraph*, March 10, 1863.

723. The Meneely and Kimberly Foundry of Troy, New York (in operation from 1869 to 1878), the American foundry for which the most complete records of the production of single bells are available, did not begin installations until 1871 in either Northern or Southern states. That said, installations in Northern states overwhelmingly outnumbered those in Southern states.

724. Quoted in Williams, *St. Michael's, Charleston*, 291.

725. Data from the Tower Directory maintained by the Guild of Carillonneurs in North America: <http://www.gcna.org/tower-directory.html>. The first chime acquired in the South after the war was installed in 1882 at the United Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia.

Despite the proliferation of chimes after 1850, most congregations assembled to the sound of a single bell, and in smaller communities, the same bells that called churchgoers to religious services also sounded for fire alarms and other purposes. Even in these circumstances, Americans attended to the churchgoing bell's sound with different aesthetic expectations. They remarked on the fire bell's volume and duration, and they complained if it sounded too frequently (especially if alarms were false). Similarly, they noted the duration and frequency of funeral bells, and some worried that the tolling's unrelenting regularity would harm vulnerable audiences. But Americans did not expect either of these practices to sound pleasing or musical. More importantly, the sweetness or stridency of the churchgoing bell's sound evoked different associations for parties on opposing sides of disputes. Listeners who, like the editor of the *Columbus Sunday Enquirer*, perceived "something beautiful in the tones of the church-going bell," could hear "a whole sermon in their notes" and find the world, "at least for a time, a holier place."⁷²⁶ The churchgoing bell's critics, in contrast, reliably linked audible dissonance to sectarian strife. The "unharmonious and conflicting sounds of some six or eight neighboring church-bells," complained an unhappy listener to the editor of the *New York Daily Times* in April 1853, "stir within me no thought of Sabbath sanctity. They lead me to think but of discord and religious differences."⁷²⁷

726. "Church Bells—Interpretation of Their Language," *Columbus (GA) Sunday Enquirer*, 18 April. 1875, [3].

727. "Philo, "Church Bells," *New York Daily Times*, 9 April 1853, 3.

Harrison v. St. Mark's Church

Half a century after public opposition to churchgoing bell surfaced, critics steadfastly maintained that the churchgoing bell's function was to summon, and its primary audience was the congregation whose religious service impended. The churchgoing bell's advocates continued to conceive the practice's purpose and audience more broadly. When opposing sides debated the churchgoing bell's utility and necessity, however, their arguments reflected cultural and material changes that had transpired in the intervening decades. Denizens of the "public clock era," for instance, more frequently referenced the ubiquity of person and public timepieces when arguing that the churchgoing bell was unnecessary.⁷²⁸ With "clocks and watches in all houses and pockets," insisted Nathaniel Burton, a congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut, in June 1875, bells brought "nobody to church who would not come otherwise."⁷²⁹ In response, a fellow inhabitant remarked that ministers "whose services commence[d] at the same hour as those of other churches" could find bells unnecessary because their own congregations lived "within the sound of other people's bells," insinuating that Burton's own congregants were not as reliant on clocks and watches as he supposed.⁷³⁰ More commonly, the churchgoing bell's advocates sidestepped the "clocks and watches" argument, declining to engage, or interpreted it as a broader attack on Christianity. "[I]f we are to discard every other consideration but this 'necessity,' argued one "Jack

728. Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

729. N. [Nathaniel Burton], "A Complaint and an Appeal," *Hartford Daily Courant*, 12 June 1875, 1. Although Nathaniel Burton's initial complaint and subsequent response were printed only with his first initial, subscribers who responded to the complaint identified Burton by name.

730. Half-Sick, "Those Dreadful Bells," *Hartford Daily Courant*, 15 June 1875, 2.

Sparrow” of Macon, Georgia, in July 1875, “there is no possible halting place for us while on this line but to get rid of churches themselves.”⁷³¹ By this time, opponents of the churchgoing bell were questioning not only its necessity (whether it had been rendered obsolete by clocks and watches) but also its efficacy: whether congregations had dispersed geographically to a degree that rendered the audible summons ineffective. Why should church bells ring, a commentator in the *New York World* wondered, in March 1875, when “nine-tenths of the congregation of any church are outside of the sound of its bells?”⁷³²

By the 1870s, controversies over the churchgoing bell also reflected decades of negotiations over how Sundays should be observed. For some listeners, the ringing, tolling, and chiming that preceded services continued to distinguish Sundays from other days, while evoking pious thoughts and cheerful feelings. For others, the sound shattered “the solemnity and repose” of a day set aside for “rest,” an activity that a diverse population interpreted to include a range of sacred and secular activities.⁷³³ Unhappy listeners now complained that the churchgoing bell’s sound intruded upon a variety of activities, especially sleep, personal devotions, conversation, reading, and simply enjoying quiet in private homes. At the same time, they called attention to the churchgoing bell’s harmful effects on a number of vulnerable audiences: babies and

731. Jack Sparrow, “Church Bells,” *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 6 July 1875, [6]. Sparrow, who penned two letters to the editor during this paper war, purportedly represented the consensus of a flock roosting atop the First Baptist Church, located two blocks away from the offending Mulberry Street belfries.

732. See “New Yorkers are making a movement to abolish the ringing of church bells...” *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, 30 March 1875, [2], reprinted from *New York World*.

733. “Philo,” “Church Bells,” *New York Daily Times*, 9 April 1853, 3. On Americans’ negotiated understandings of Sunday rest, see Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday*, esp. 8-20.

young children, the elderly, the studious, night workers, businessmen, and the sick. This last group now included a growing subpopulation of patients suffering from “weak nerves” or “nervous headache,” complaints late-nineteenth-century medicine treated under the label neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion. Applied to a variety of symptoms, ranging from anxiety to headache to fatigue, neurasthenia was generally attributed to the sensory and mental stress of modern urban life.⁷³⁴ The churchgoing bell’s advocates seldom expressed sympathy for night workers who needed to sleep on Sunday mornings or businessmen who wished to observe Sabbath rest in their homes, but they were slower to dismiss the suffering of sick persons. One common response was to acknowledge the discomfort and suggest that the bell could be temporarily suspended in cases of particular illness. Another was to shift the conversation from acoustics to aesthetics. Could the churchgoing bell’s sound be harmful when it was so melodious and sweet?

City dwellers often explicitly linked harm and annoyance to the conditions of “a large and closely built-up city” (in the words of a March 1875 measure entertained by New York’s Board of Aldermen), and urban complainants at times contrasted their own situation with an imagined rural setting.⁷³⁵ “In the country, where everybody wants to go to church to relieve the tedium of the day, and where there is no standard of time, bell-ringing is, in some sort, a necessity,” remarked a *New York Times* editorial in August

734. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Introduction,” in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, 1-30 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001); Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Tom Lutz, “Varieties of Medical Experience: Doctors and Patients, Psyche and Soma in America,” in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, 51-76 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

735. “Municipal Movements. Aggressive Measures of the Aldermen,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1875, 8.

1883.⁷³⁶ Yet disputes over the churchgoing bell were not exclusive to the nation's most populous cities. Proposals to regulate the duration of ringing on Sundays surfaced in small towns and large cities at approximately the same time. Although small-town complainants did not describe sound ricocheting off tall buildings, they faulted the churchgoing bell for many of the same reasons as their big-city counterparts, and they largely agreed on the conditions that could mitigate (or exacerbate) the annoyance. An editor in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, for instance, was not surprised to read complaints about "incessant bell-ringing" in Lancaster newspapers in March 1852. In Lancaster (population 12,000), he explained, there were "four or five churches quite contiguous to each other," all of them in possession of bells with "strong stentorian, and withal *sonorous* tones," with several of the churches having "*two bells a piece*."⁷³⁷ Given these circumstances, complaints were foreseeable.

In December 1875, when neighbors of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia learned of the church's plans to acquire a chime of bells, they foresaw plummeting property values, suffering, and annoyance. The health of the street's residents, they explained in a letter to the rector and vestry, "absolutely requires that their nervous systems should not be shocked by the sharp, sudden and loud noises inevitably issuing from a chime of bells when rung." Moreover, the bells were not necessary (the "wants of the community and of church-members do not require the erection thereof"), and their frequent use would cause suffering to sick persons and children." The vestry did

736. "The Board of Health is considering a complaint..." *New York Times*, 28 August 1883, 4.

737. "Ring of Church Bells," *German Reformed Messenger*, 3 March 1852, [2] (emphasis in original).

not address the matter of necessity. They expressed confidence, however, “that the annoyance will not be so serious as seems to be anticipated.” And four bells (the full octave to be completed later) had already been ordered.⁷³⁸ This is how the nation’s first lawsuit to restrain the churchgoing bell’s sound began.

Previous scholarship has addressed a number of reasons why the Rittenhouse neighborhood and St. Mark’s Square, in particular, were ripe for controversy.⁷³⁹ To begin with, the church’s tower, completed in 1851, had remained empty for almost twenty-five years. In the intervening decades, the city had built up around the Gothic revival church, and at the time of the lawsuit it was surrounded by expensive brownstone homes, inhabited by wealthy citizens. The neighborhood’s demographics, Isaac Weiner has shown, skewed heavily Episcopalian. Rittenhouse Episcopalians, however, were not a homogenous group. Whereas the St. Mark’s congregation embraced high church theology and ritual, Weiner argued, “most of St. Mark’s closest neighbors were low church or broad church Episcopalians who attended other nearby churches.”⁷⁴⁰ The high church rector of St. Mark’s Church, Augustus Eugene Hoffman, also lived a block away from the church, as did the bishop of the diocese, William Bacon Stevens, whom one historian has described as “militantly low church.”⁷⁴¹ The neighborhood was also home to two

738. *Report of Harrison et al.*, 32-35.

739. A. Thomas Miller, *Bells on Trial, Bells Restored: The Story of the Bells of Saint Mark’s Church Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2000). <http://www.phillyringers.com/stmarks/new%20trial.htm>; Schwartz, *Making Noise*, 301-14; See Nicholas B. Wainwright, “The Bells of St. Mark’s,” *Address of Nicholas B. Wainwright*. (Philadelphia, PA: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 1958), Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, Chapters 1-2.

740. Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, 47.

741. Thomas F. Rzeznik, *Church and Estate: Religion and Wealth in Industrial-Era Philadelphia* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2013), 93 (quotation), 87-96.

physicians who were widely-known for treating nervous conditions: Jacob Mendes Da Costa, who identified and treated “soldier’s heart,” and Silas Weir Mitchell, who developed the “rest cure” for neurasthenia.⁷⁴² Mitchell, in particular, had a number of patients in the vicinity. The husband of one “great sufferer” under Mitchell’s care testified to seeking out the neighborhood precisely because it was quiet.⁷⁴³

When the St. Mark’s bells were first tested, near the end of June 1876, a notice in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* pronounced their tone “peculiarly rich” and “musical.”⁷⁴⁴ Beyond the Rittenhouse neighborhood, the larger Philadelphia audience encountered unique opportunities to evaluate the sound of bells. The Centennial Exhibition, which had opened in May, featured a chime of thirteen bells, with performances featuring well-known tunes staged throughout the summer. Diarist Anna K. Baker enjoyed listening to these chimes, and she noted particular songs performed during her visits to the Exhibition. “The bells chimed some old Scotch airs, that Gertrude Barrett used to sing,” she wrote on June 19. “It is worth a visit to the Park just to hear those old time melodies.”⁷⁴⁵ The next bell to receive a hearing was the symbol-laden Centennial Bell, a gift from Henry Seybert weighing one thousand pounds for each of the original thirteen states, cast from an alloy incorporating metal from two Revolutionary era cannon (one American and one British), and two Civil War era cannon (one Union and one

742. On “soldier’s heart” (also known as Da Costa’s syndrome), see Rona Moss-Morris and Keith J. Petrie. *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5-7.

743. *Ibid.*, 85-86.

744. “St. Mark’s P. E. Church,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 June 1876, 2. Perhaps the bells were sounded in advance of their first testing. If not the *Inquirer*’s review, which was printed in the morning, before the bells rang for their “test,” was remarkably prescient.

745. Anna K. Baker, diary, entry dated 19 June 1876, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Confederate). The tone of this bell received mixed reviews in local newspapers when it was first sounded at midnight on July 4. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that listeners had stopped to admire the “clear tones,” but the contention in other papers that the bell’s sound was “weak” and “muffled” gained momentum, eventually leading to an expert inspection, terse correspondence between the foundry and the mayor’s office, and an eventual recasting—all accompanied by press commentary. “We mean no disrespect to Mr. Seybert,” opined the *Philadelphia Evening Star* three weeks after the bell’s debut, “but the fact stands undisputed that the new State House bell is about as complete a failure as anything in that particular line could well be. There is something so dismal and depressing in its tone that it is to be sincerely hoped that it will speedily be removed and recast.”⁷⁴⁶

The situation intensified in early November of 1876, after Silas Weir Mitchell appealed to the vestry on behalf of some of his “unlucky nervous patients,” who, he said, were being “driven wild by the early bells of St. Mark’s.”⁷⁴⁷ Shortly thereafter, the vestry was presented with two petitions. The first, signed by forty-eight residents, requested that the early Sunday bell be discontinued and that the duration of ringing at other times be shortened. The second, signed by thirteen local physicians, including Mitchell, detailed the potential health threats posed by the bells. The St. Mark’s vestry responded by confirming their willingness to consider silencing the bells upon receipt of specific

746. “Other Events,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 5, 1876, 7; “Affairs Around Town,” *Philadelphia Evening Star*, July 10, 1876, 1; *Philadelphia Evening Star*, July 25, 1876, 2. See also “Affairs Around Town,” *Philadelphia Evening Star*, July 11, 1876; “Incidents of City Life,” *Philadelphia Evening Star*, July 15, 1876. For more on the Centennial Bell, see Arthur H. Frazier, “Henry Seybert and the Centennial Clock and Bell at Independence Hall,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102, no. 1 (1978).

747. *Report of Harrison et al.*, 36.

requests from individual patients, while at the same time “entirely” denying “the right of the residents in the vicinity to regulate in any way the manner or the time of ringing the bells.” During the next two weeks, portions of the correspondence (which had been conscientiously marked “only for private use”) fell into the hands of the press, and the semi-private discussion between the church and its neighbors became a topic of public debate.⁷⁴⁸ The lawsuit was filed in early January 1877, and in February Judge John Hare of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas restrained St. Mark’s from ringing its bells in any way that caused annoyance to the neighbors.⁷⁴⁹ Upon appeal, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court modified Hare’s ruling, allowing the bells to ring for two minutes before services.⁷⁵⁰

The arguments presented by the complainants’ attorneys echoed those of aggrieved listeners in earlier disputes, unwaveringly confining the churchgoing bell’s audience to the congregation whose bell was sounding for a service. “The bells have no connection with the religious services,” William Henry Rawle argued in his closing statement for the defendants. “They can serve but two purposes only: —(1) to give notice of the meetings; (2) or to gratify the congregation by the noise,—or it may be the music.”⁷⁵¹ The neighbors’ initial bill of complaint had dismissed the first purpose with a familiar argument: clocks and watches had rendered an audible summons unnecessary for assembling a congregation, and—here the complainants bent a little—if an audible

748. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

749. *Ibid.*, 491.

750. See Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*, 69.

751. *Report of Harrison et al.*, 373.

summons *was* necessary a full chime was not; churchgoers could be summoned “just as effectually” by a single bell.⁷⁵² The defense, like Bishop Hobart in 1825, envisioned an audience more expansive than a single congregation and assigned it a more evangelical function. George Washington Biddle, when making his closing arguments for the defense, could think of nothing “more touching or more thoughtful than that arrestation, even for a moment, which a man will involuntarily make when he hears these bells, reminding him that the Savior took upon him our flesh for our advantage.”⁷⁵³ The bells’ sound, Biddle argued, was “inseparably connected in the hearts and thoughts of almost every one with the worship of Almighty God,” which is why clocks and watches could never replace church bells.⁷⁵⁴ The defense did, however, recognize a more narrowly defined audience in the Rittenhouse neighborhood who relied on the bells of St. Mark’s in the absence of clocks and watches. For the poor, the chiming supplied “an easy and (to them) inexpensive mode of ascertaining the hours for religious and other duties.”⁷⁵⁵

Indeed, the nearby residents who gave statements for the defense mentioned this use of the churchgoing bell—to “fix” or “mark” the time—more than any other. Two residents described listening to the bells for this purpose and added, “We go by them.”⁷⁵⁶ Possibly, these listeners, who lived on narrow streets north of the church, meant that they relied on the bells to attend services at St. Mark’s or another nearby church.⁷⁵⁷ If so, this

752. *Ibid.*, 4-5 (quotations), 373.

753. *Ibid.*, 465.

754. *Ibid.*, 445.

755. *Ibid.*, 20.

756. *Ibid.*, 195, 198.

757. St. Mark’s offered two services free of charge. If these residents attended the free services, they would not have been identified as St. Mark’s pew holders in the affidavits.

is the closest any of the interviewees came to saying that the sound of the churchgoing bell was useful as a summons. Residents giving statements for the complainants, unsurprisingly, found the chiming useless themselves and argued that it was also useless, or at least unnecessary, for parishioners of St. Mark's. The most common reasoning offered was that the St. Mark's congregation was too scattered to be effectively summoned by the bells. "It is a well-known fact that an infinitely small proportion of the residents within the sound of these bells have any connection whatsoever with St. Mark's Church," explained Herbert M. Howe (who lived immediately across the street from the church's bell tower), "and therefore the great majority within their call have no interest in knowing that a service is about to be held there."⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁸. *Report of Harrison et al.*, 118.

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